

*Starting Today You Are the Demon King volume 2:
This Time, the MA-gical Ultimate Weapon!*
Takabayashi Tomo



Prologue



Julia, I think of myself as a very happy man.

When I lost you, I hated and blamed everything in this world. I hated and blamed myself. To have survived was my guilt and my shame, and I despaired at having to continue living.

I never thought that I might again be given something I would sacrifice my own life to protect, and I cursed the Mazoku blood that aged with such excruciating slowness.

But everything is different now.

I wanted to carry all of the sins and wounds of your soul, gone so far before me, on my own shoulders. If there really is a place called Heaven, I wanted to believe that your heart had gone there.

And if you were to be born again in another place, I prayed that you would live a happy life. That you would not come across a guy like me and take the wrong path.

Julia.

I'm still living.

I cannot forget you, but I've found that most precious of things once more.

Chapter 1

I guess I couldn't get over it after all, and ended up founding an association of baseball lovers.

Our goal: to be the number one grass-roots baseball team in Japan; our rallying cry: "maltz and handshakes at the Tokyo Dome!"

"So this cable TV reporter points his mike at me and asks: 'Why did you start playing baseball again after having already given it up?'"

I slap the Kerorin bucket: *kapoon!* and raise my voice to make sure I can be heard beyond the door. "Aaah, this is heaven! And you know what he said at the end?—'Thank you very much. This was the captain of the Dandelions, Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi-san!' Can you believe it? Okay, so it was cable, but he was still a TV reporter! I was so nervous, I had no idea if I could say any of that stuff on national television! Hey Murata Ken, are you listening?"

Kapoon.

"I've never watched cable TV except at the neighbor's."

"Yeah, but—!"

Murata yells back over the sound of the water, "That's pretty nice though—Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi! Sounds like the name of a comedy duo, doesn't it?"

"Like Ucchan Nanchan?"

"Yeah, or the All-Hanshin Giant."

"Uwagh, stop that, geez! You think putting me with the Giants and Hanshin would make me happy?! I'm Pa League through and through—I've been in the Pacific since I was born."

"Yeah, and you're the one who said you wanted to show me the joy of the burning Pa. So why're you still taking your sweet time pickling yourself in the bath? Are we really going to make it for the 13:00 start? Nevermind whether you're Miyagawa Daisuke Hanako or Seto Tenya Wanya or Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi already."

"...Murata, how old are you again?"

Yup, my name's Shibuya Yuuri. Not the 'Yuuri' for 'fertile country' or 'gentle pear tree' or 'enduring lapis lazuli'—no, it had to be 'profitable'. I can't tell you how many problems I've had in my fifteen years of existence just because of this name.

I resented my parents for it for a long time, wondering if my dad, who's a banker, was so

obsessed with interest rates that he even named his son after them. Then I finally found out that the one who gave me my name was actually a young man who shared a taxi with my mom just before she gave birth to me...though it was still my dad who chose those particular characters.

These past few Sundays I've been playing grass-lot baseball in the morning, then zooming over to help out at the Seibu Dome after enjoying the lunchtime special fare at the public bathhouse near the town sports grounds. It's like I'm living the life of an old-timer baseball fan. And today, to give the Pa League one more fan, I'm dragging Murata along with me.

I shared a class with Glasses-kun Murata Ken in my second and third years of junior high, and met him again, rather oddly, just about a month ago behind the park restrooms. Then right after that it was through a Western-style toilet to another world: GO! I got caught up in all these things that you'd totally think couldn't happen outside of a dream, and learned the shocking truth about my birth.

Say you're at one of those mixers where everybody gets excited and chants: "Who's the king?" with chopsticks in one hand.

I am!

I'm a feudal lord at the proud age of fifteen.

A king, even. And not just any common king. I mean, I probably lose out a bit to world record holder Manager Ou of the Daiei Hawks, but my title is pretty amazing too. I might be just a senior high school student with average physique and average looks, and even average brains, but...

I'm the Demon King.

I was suddenly summoned to another world, mobbed by transcendently gorgeous beauties, told 'starting from today you're the Demon King'—anyone would think it was a dream. I thought so too. But when I opened my eyes, a charm that I'd been given in that world was still hanging around my neck.

I grip the stone that I've worn constantly around my neck since then. It's the size of a 500-yen coin, a magic stone of a hue deeper than the blue of the sky: a lions blue in a silver setting pleading for the case that it hadn't all been a dream.

I was born with the soul of the Maou, and I made a promise to protect that world.

I promised.

"Shibuya! Shi-bu-ya, we should be making the transfer at Tokorozawa right now."

"I told you, we'll be fine! If we don't stop at the convenience store, we'll have plenty of time to get to a day game this early in the summer. Didn't I say I'm going to give you a step-by-step explanation starting from the pre-game warm-ups?"

"I'm going to wait outside, so hurry up a bit."

"All right, all right already."

He's a disgrace to the Japanese race if he doesn't understand the wonders of the public

bath. I'll get out after counting to a hundred. I sink into the tub to my nose. The water flows gently in front of me: left to right, slowly, slowly.

Hmm?

Why is the public bathhouse bathwater flowing in a fixed direction?

I fearfully turn to my right against the alarms going off in my head. The wall's on that side: light blue square tiles with white joints, laid out in an orderly pattern, Kyoto-style. In the middle of it is a fist-sized black disc.

"...Black disc...black hole?!"

That's where the water's going.

The hot bathwater, now clearly moving much faster than a few seconds ago, is being steadily sucked inside.

I hurriedly stand up to tell someone, forgetting even to cover my front. Since it's the middle of the day, the men's bath is empty of children, adults, and elderly—it's like the place was reserved just for me.

"Hey, heeey, Murata! Can you call—can you call somebody from the bathhouse?!"

I stand up and crouch down again in senseless repetition, thinking: no, wait, I can't ask someone for something like this.

"Murata-kun, where'd you go?! Murata-saaan! Call the lifeguard—I mean, just call someone! There's a hole in the bathtub, and all the hot water's running out!"

Nobody's coming.

Not that it's actually any of my fault, so I should just pretend I haven't seen anything, get back to the dressing room and get dressed, then tell them 'it looks like the hot water's run out' on my way out. I mean, otherwise they'll make a big fuss and force me to tell them what happened, right? I'll probably get the blame for breaking it, to say nothing of not making the game on time. In the worst case, I might even be put in jail and end up having to eat stinky food.

My gaze abruptly falls on the hole again. It's now bigger than a heart. Oh God, what should I do? Please show me the right path. Or maybe it's bad form for the Maou to ask God for advice? Okay then, this is from the bottom of my Japanese heart: please let your power be manifest from the sacred mountain of Fuji—I turn to look at the huge mural at my back.

A smiling Hakone Hachiri no Hanjirou in his travelling outfit: doesn't look like he'll grant any request of mine.

"Dammit, the things they put on bathhouse murals nowadays...! I'm soooo sorry, the hot water ran out and soaked into the building foundations or building substructure and rotted through and that's why the entire place crumbled, and it's so terrible—! Somebody, somebodyyyyy—!"

Okay, I'm scaring myself. For now I've gotta stop the water from flowing out.

I look for something to stuff into the hole, but there's nothing but buckets and chairs lying about. I hit on soap, but I only have a bottle of body shampoo.

That's when the story of the boy who blocks up the hole in the bank with his arm to protect his village from the flood pops into my mind. He sacrificed his life to save others—that episode's one you can't talk about without tearing up.

What should I do? Should I thrust myself into it?

"Argh, geez, I'm not gonna die or anything...huh?!"

When I boldly stick my right hand inside, the impact breaks the tiles, and the hole grows almost twice as big. Does this mean I'm now the 'culprit'?! I hurriedly push my left hand in too. Rather than sealing the leakage, the flow of water gains strength so rapidly that now my body's almost starting to move too. The vacuum-ish hole is so powerful that I feel like it's about to suck me in. There's no way my average high school male student's body is going to be washed down the...

But haven't I been sucked down the drain once before?

This again?!

I'm pulled into the hole in the tiles by the arms. No, that's just impossible, physically impossible, biologically impossible, and impossible on a global scale too. No matter how much I contort myself Cirque du Soleil Saltimbanco-style, it's totally impossible!

As I expected, it's the same Star Tours as last time.

Hey, Nii-chan.

What is it, little brother?

What happens to a person's body when they "warp"?

Huh?!

I mean, we'll eventually build amazing spaceships and go to other planets, right?

Like the models you see in Star Wars or Star Trek or Red Dwarf. So we have to train our bodies, because it'd be really embarrassing if we threw up in the middle of a warp, right?

Are you stupid?! Stop obsessing over these fantasies. If you've got the free time to think about stuff like that, why don't you use it to memorize a few English words? This is why your grades are so bad! Just last week at the station Mototan Okamura saw us, and he was joking, 'I couldn't believe that was really your little brother!' Space travel isn't going to become a reality in our lifetime, so there's no use worrying about it! And no need to train for warping either!

That's what he told me, but I should've trained after all.

Because though I've space-traveled several times now, I haven't even had the time to bring a barf bag—what would happen if I threw up?

I open my eyes to somewhere obviously different than where I was, but all the panic's gone out of me.

'Cause I've just been summoned again, haven't I.

This isn't the first time that I've been washed away to another world, and I'm rather happier for it not being from the public lavatory again. There are oodles of stories about the main character of a story getting lost in a sword-and-magic world and becoming a hero. Mine is a bit different, since my character profile happens to have 'Maou' for a job description.

I landed face-up, and I wriggle around like a jellyfish. My vision is still foggy and completely gray. My back is slightly warm, but my chest and stomach are somewhat chilled. Though I know I thrust my arms into the hole in the bathtub earlier, I can touch my hands together just by poking out my index fingers. What is this, ninja arts? That childish prank where you poke people in the behind?

What kind of hole was I trying to plug up again...?

The gray is a high ceiling, and when I slowly look around at my surroundings, I can see palm trees in an artificial jungle. It looks like the Summerland from the kindergarten in my neighborhood I went to when I was a kid. I've apparently been floating unconscious in a heated swimming pool.

When I cautiously try to stand up, I can feel my feet solidly touching bottom. The water comes up a little above my bellybutton, like in a pool made for children. There are several people in a huddle some distance away. Maybe they're afraid of my hair color? Only the Mazoku have black eyes and hair in this world, and even then very rarely, so most Humans fear it as a bad omen.

Or rather, something more sinister than a bad omen.

Or rather, something more evil than sinister.

Sadly, racial discrimination is pretty bad here, and Mazoku and Humans are violently hostile towards each other. Humans fear Mazoku and attack them, while Mazoku hate Humans and scorn them. Though I swore to become the king so I can improve this situation, even if by just a little bit.

"Um, it's all right. See, I'm not going to burn anything. I'm the guy the girls put a 'harmless to man or beast' sticker on."

No matter how fired up I am with my ideals as a king, I'm a bit lacking in persuasive power naked in a pool.

"And I'm not an exhibitionist or anything either."

I can't really tell because they're submerged up to their shoulders, but I'm guessing from their shyness and bearing that they're female. The orange-haired lady at the front of the five, six-person group asks in a jazzy, husky voice, "...Your Majesty?"

"Huh?"

I unthinkingly do a little dance for joy.

Only the Mazoku would call me "Your Majesty" at first sight of my Japanese-born black hair. Which means they're Mazoku, and this is somewhere in Shinma Kingdom. Last time I fell outside the border, and a group of Human villagers threw rocks and pointed spades and hoes at me—it was a really disastrous welcome event.

"All right! I landed in an ordinary place this time! The manner is just a bit too sexy for me, but...um, if somebody can lend me a towel, I promise to wash it and return it. And if you can all close your eyes, I'll take my leave...huh?!"

"Your Majestyyyyy!" a blonde with unusually wide shoulders yells in a throaty voice, standing.

It's not just me—they're all naked, too.

"Huh?!"

"Your Majestyyyyy! He's the real thing! He's soooo cuuute!"

They come rushing over, accompanied by loud splashes.

"Huh? Uh, why are your chests all...gyaah..."

I'm shoved back into the water. I've never been this popular in my life. The blonde beauty is holding my hands in hers dreamily. But there's one big problem.

None of them have chests. Well, yes, they have firm bulges where breasts should be. Except those are more like pectoral muscles than breasts. The assertive ladies hug me tight and even rub their cheeks against mine.

"It's all rough...was that facial hair?! Stubble?! Wait, don't tell me you're all guys instead of la...gurgle..."

"Your Majesty, welcome ba...aaaah!!"



The door opens.

A familiar voice reaches me in this other world I've been brought back to, a world that's just wrong in pretty much every way. The two-person faction trying with all its might to make Shibuya Yuuri a fully qualified Maou comes running over in a real hurry. They look like idols passing through the audience on their way to the stage.

Except the Earth-manufactured hunks can't hold a candle to them when it comes to looks. They're so good-looking that you can almost see flower petals floating in their wake.

The long gray hair of my tutor, Lord Günter von Kleist, is disheveled, and his lilac eyes look like they're about to overflow, spoiling his transcendent beauty. On the other hand, Lord Weller looks like he's trying to resist an indiscreet grin and gamely has his actor's face on. Stop that, Conrad—weren't we midnight catch buddies just a little while ago?

The ladies—strike that, gentlemen—are clinging to my lower body.

"Hurry up and save me...gurggle...aaah...cough...you're not supposed to run next to the pool...!"

"Your Majesty, are you all right? Release him, all of you! Do you have any idea who this is?!"

This isn't Mito Koumon. Not caring that his clothes (pearl white in cell phone terms) are getting wet, Günter forces his way through the group. I should've left my seal of state with him or something.

"...Is that Lord Günter?"

Their expressions change.

"Wh-why are you looking at me like that?"

My tutor is suddenly nailed by their stares.

"Kyaah! His Majesty is adorable, but Lord Günter is so dreamy! That's the first beauty of Shinma Kingdom for you—he's even more beautiful when he's wet!"

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

The beasts attack the beauty with cries that are more bellows than melodic invitations.

Geez, beauty is a sin.

"Here we go, rescue complete."

Conrad puts his arms around me and plucked me out of the water like an exposed ball from a Rugby scrum. He wraps what looks like a hotel bathrobe around me.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty," my precious baseball buddy says in that refreshing way I remember.

"...Thanks, Conrad. And since you *are* the guy who named me, stop being so formal. I don't want to be called 'Your Majesty' by you.

"Ah, right."

He's also the first-rate chap who took my soul to Earth and offered my mom a ride as she was standing on a Boston street corner in her last month of pregnancy. That's why Lord Conrart Weller was the one who gave me my name in America before he returned here. The girls in my class would go green with envy if they knew my name came from such a cool young man. But though he may look like he's around twenty, he's actually older than my granddad. In this world, those who possess Mazoku blood are really long-lived—and even worse, are certified beauties to boot. Conrad's on the plainer side since he's half Human, but all the other aristocrats are so beautiful it's scary. Even if they're not all on Günter's level, there are still droves and droves of people who're superhumanly beautiful.

Well, okay, so they're *not* Human.

It really irks my inferiority complex because I'm always, thumb-gnawingly worried about whether I can really be the Maou when I'm so average in looks and physique and brains.

"How is your world? Is your mother doing well? Oh, and—" Conrad adds, his silver-flecked hazel eyes narrowed impishly, "How're the Red Sox doing right now?"

"I haven't looked at the rankings this season."

I grin back at him. This is our common passion. Conrad, who caught the baseball bug in Boston, even has a ball signed by a Major Leaguer. The population of baseball players in Shinma Kingdom right now is a grand total of two—in other words, me and him.

"But you know, this year Nomo...achoo!"

"Gesundheit. Are you all right, Yuuri? Please bear with my jacket for the time being. Günter will put me through the wringer if you catch a cold."

"I'm fine, just got some water up my nose. Speaking of which, what happened to Günter?"

He's being crushed by the ladies in the heated pool.

"Con-Conrart, stop laughing, help me...!"

"Nooo, please don't run away, Lord Günter!"

Actually, that sounded more like a 'you're not getting away!' This is the first time ever that I've been grateful for his beauty.

"Thank you, Günter, for sacrificing yourself for my sake. I'll never forget you."

"Your Majesty?! Please wait, Your Majesty! I'm not dead yet, I'm not—!"

Around a month ago Japan time, I came to stay at the Blood Pledge Castle in this country's capital.

"This place feels kinda different."

"That's quite true, Your Majesty. We are in the eastern region of the kingdom founded by the great Shinou and the powerful, wise, and courageous Mazoku who—ah, it must not be forgotten are said to be the origin of everything in the world—defeated the Soushu and his army to their eternal glory..." Günter sings with his eyes closed, enraptured, exactly like a tenor in an opera. He's even got the upward-pointing fingers.

Though that might have sounded like the national anthem, it's actually the country's name. I daringly abbreviate it Shinma Kingdom.

"...and this is Voltaire Castle."

"Voltaire! Which means this is Gwendal's castle?!"

"Oh, you have guessed it already! Your Majesty's sagacity astounds me constantly."

The room to which I'm taken is as spacious as the event hall of a first-class hotel. Swords and shields hang on the walls, and medieval-style suits of armor stand in the four corners.

The master of this castle, Lord Gwendal von Voltaire, is nowhere to be seen. Only the three of us are standing at the fireplace: me in my fresh change of clothes made in the style of a Japanese school uniform, Conrad leaning against the wall with his long legs crossed, and Günter smiling so hugely his eyes are narrow slits. It's the third month of spring in the Shinma Kingdom calendar, but after sundown the fire still feels wonderful.

"Aah, Your Majesty, you seem in good health, and that is more important than anything else. When you suddenly disappeared from before our very eyes, my sorrow was such that I wept for ten days."

Behind him, Conrad mouths 'It's true.'

"Sorry 'bout that. But I want to be a member of my family before being a Maou."

"What fine words!"

There's still a huge kiss mark on Günter's cheek. Regardless of who left it there, there's such a thing as being a little too popular.

"Then you must think of your kingdom all the more. Now that you have ascended the throne, all the people of this country are your children."

"That's a lot of kids for somebody who's only fifteen!"

"Yes. Now, Your Majesty, please sign these documents. This is a report of the spring tax from the lands under your direct control, and this gives approval to those districts which have requested fortification of their riverbanks for the rainy season. If I may be so bold, I believe from the reports of the officials in charge that these figures are indeed correct."

You understand this a lot better than I do, don't you. Huh, I guess this is what statecraft is all about. The staff is smarter than the guy at the top.

"So I sign here, right?...sign...agh, that makes me kinda nervous. When I was a kid I thought only baseball players were asked to sign stuff."

Up until the summer I was twelve, when I learned that anybody who uses a credit card to buy something will be asked to sign for it.

My signature sends Günter into eulogy mode again.

"Magnificent! Look at these elegant lines, their soul-stirring combination! I have never before seen such a tour de force of calligraphy. And of such complexity as to foil all imitation, no matter how dexterous the imitator!"

Well, yeah, even the famous Jean Reno has trouble writing kanji. A counterfeiter would definitely have trouble with Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi.

Er? Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi...? I couldn't have added Harajuku to the end of my own name, could I?!

"Now then," Günter says, suddenly serious. I'm getting a bad feeling here. When a teacher looks that, it usually means T-R-O-U-B-L-E. Like 'I've taken you off the bench list' or 'Did you steal Fukuda-kun's lunch money?' Although lunch is paid through a bank transfer.

"These is something of great import which requires a decision from Your Majesty."

"Wha-what?"

He glides close. I may not be particularly susceptible to men, but my heartbeat still picks up a notch.

"There is unrest among the Humans, such that we may cross swords before long. In any case, they appear to be preparing for battle."

"Battle...as in, war?! Didn't I say that I will absolutely not go to war?! I don't care what they're preparing, no war means no war. Did I not decide when I became the king of this country that we would not go to war?!"

That's right, I became the Maou so that the Mazoku could coexist peacefully with Humans. It's wrong for people to fight each other just because they're from different races. War is absolutely not the right choice: if this world has no one to chant that axiom, then I am determined to become the first. I may have the soul of the Maou, but I was still born and raised Japanese, and that was what I was taught in the other world.

"But Your Majesty, if we do not take the offensive, what happens when they bring war to us? To simply roll over and surrender is not something this kingdom will ever..."

"Still! At least for now war is out of the question! And I'm not signing any documents declaring war! Ack, you didn't have me sign anything like that earlier, did you?! And what does "unrest" mean, anyway? How am I supposed to know anything if you don't give me any concrete information?"

"The gathering of magicians, no expenses spared. When Humans quarrel with us, magic-users are essential," an absolutely unrivalled deep bass voice answers from behind me.

An angel and a demon are standing in the open doorway: the master of this castle, Lord Gwendal von Voltaire, making his entrance to the Love Theme from *The Godfather*, and a Vienna Boy Choir OB-style pretty boy, Lord Wolfram von Bielefeld.

The Yuuri's-inferiority-complex-triggering group of beauties is now completely assembled.

Brothers who are nothing like each other really do exist.

Lord Gwendal von Voltaire, oldest son of the previous Maou, with his ash-gray hair so dark that it might almost be called black and sullen blue eyes that not even the most beautiful woman can coax into good humor, totally looks like the best choice for the position of Maou. His voice is so low it sounds like it comes from his hips. Lord Wolfram von Bielefeld, on the other hand, is my twin in stature and physique, but angelically handsome. If you didn't know he was Mazoku, you'd think he was God's greatest masterpiece. Glittering gold hair, white skin, long eyelashes, and emerald-green eyes. But that damn arrogance of his makes him sound like a yapping Pomeranian.

Well, heredity runs deep for these brothers. Rather more surprising is the fact that Conrad is between them.

The previous Maou, now Her Majesty the Prior Maou, Lady Cäcilie von Spietzweg, aka Pheromone Queen Cäli, once fell in love with a Human of unknown lineage who owned nothing of value except for his sword. Their son is Lord Conrart Weller. Beside the beauty of the other Mazoku, he looks very close to Human. I can't explain it very well, but...there must be a lot of average-looking actors who go to Hollywood movie auditions; if the scriptwriter picks one person from the lot to play a supporting role, that person would be Conrad. The judges would give the following comment:

"He hit on the delivery perfectly—I can see 'truth' in his performance."

That's how I'd respond if someone asked me, "What kind of a person is he?" Lord Weller is the only one I'd only be able to answer that question for. I don't think anyone but a language teacher would be able to sufficiently sketch out the other Mazoku, but it'd be impossible to completely describe them, no matter how flowery the words.

In any case, even though Gwendal, Conrart, and Wolfram are half-brothers born from the same mother, they have not one characteristic in common, in outward appearance, personality or worldview.

"I don't remember giving him permission to enter my castle," Gwendal tosses at me, looking down on me with dislike—

"Yuuri! How could you disappear in the middle of the coronation? I can't believe you..." Wolfram, who's made a hobby of biting my head off, begins.

They start off together for the table at the center of the room. Gwendal with his longer legs arrives at my chair first.

Those eyes looking down at me from their lofty height are full of authoritative dignity and self-confidence.

No matter what you say, I've already been crowned the Maou, so don't try to explain it away or trivialize it—I don't even have the time to put myself on guard before he walks past me and spreads a map open in front of Günter and Conrad.

"It's Cavalcade."

"Cavalcade? It can't be."

"No, they're using Sondergaard as a front, but Cavalcade is providing the funds. If you do not believe the intelligence provided by my spies, then you will have to do an independent investigation."

What's going on with kava in what zone?

I peer at the map. He's pointing at a large continent separated by an ocean from the area that looks like Shinma Kingdom. Two of those color-differentiated countries are probably Cavalcade and Sondergaard. Judging by the first thing Gwendal said, I guess the people of Cavalcade are planning to attack the Mazoku.

Günter adopts a stereotypical smart-person tone.

"But how can Cavalcade have the leisure when they're so preoccupied with their pirate problem? Ships from Taurog are coming under attack, so the report of aid from Sondergaard and Hildyard is..."

"On the surface. But reports say that a percentage of the resulting damage has been returned to their country."

A ruse?! Make-believe piracy?

I prick up my ears at these dirty goings-on of the adult world, but Wolfram roughly jerks my head back. His lake's bottom green eyes meet mine.

Target: lock on.

"How dare you vanish from right in front of us after saying that you would become this country's king?! I was going settle things with you properly after you were safely done with the coronation ceremony!"

"Se-settle? I told you, I'm fine with a tie!...or no, if you still find it that hard to swallow, then let's just say I lost, okay? 'Cause ultimately that duel was like one of those things where an exchange of blows forged a friendship, you know?"

That's how it was. Since I didn't know anything about Shinma Kingdom's etiquette the last time I came here, I managed to inadvertently insult this angelically beautiful young man (who's actually eighty-two). In present-day Japan, you'd never imagine that slapping somebody across the face is a marriage proposal and picking up a knife dropped during a meal is acceptance of a duel. I mean, this bloody custom of dueling is completely alien to a pacifist space-casey high school student. And as for the other thing—I mean, we're both guys.

"You're were pretty strong, and I gave it my best too, so why don't we just leave it at that? We don't have to go into all of that stuff about duels and revenge again."

"That's not any kind of...hey, Yuuri! What is the meaning of this?! You're not wearing the gold bird I gave you, but you have Conrart's pendant...?!"

"Huh? But that was a brooch, right? I mean, you can't really wear it except by sticking it into your clothes. And I wasn't wearing anything this time—I was totally naked when I got summoned here, so..."

"You weren't even wearing any clothes? So you were in the midst of a liaison with some mongrel Human from that world?!"

"Liai...huh?! Me?! As in me, the one sent here after being unpopular for the fifteen years of his existence?"

"You can't deceive me, Yuuri! You're too lacking in prudence. Well, yes, I guess...you're somewhat good-looking...just a bit...so you can't help but be a temptation..."

"Ah, pru-prudence, huh?"

Yeah, and stop making me out to be some kind of handsome samurai with that peculiar aesthetic you guys have.

Meanwhile, Conrad is asking Günter and Gwendal in his usual casual but subtly pointed manner, "Shouldn't both of you start off by reporting this information to His Majesty?"

After a moment of silence, the flustered tutor recalls his position, and the eldest son gazes with displeasure at his youngest brother and the thorn in his side.

"The children seem to be talking amongst themselves."

I put everything into rushing through the crack Conrad has opened for me with his foot in the door. I have no right to call myself a king if I don't live up to his faith in me.

"Di-didn't I just say that we are not going to war? While I'm alive I don't want to see anyone

dying in battle."

As usual, trying to squeeze through a closing door is not the safest thing in the world. The counterattack is sudden and intensely cold.

"In that case, what is it you wish to do, Your Majesty?"

There is always a bite in the "Your Majesty" that drops from Lord von Voltaire's lips. He looks down at me with arms crossed, his chill gaze impregnable. Two months ago I would have retreated immediately.

"Are you planning to simply hand the kingdom over to the Humans without even returning fire when they come attacking in the near future?"

"If we know that they're going to attack, then shouldn't we be able to come up with a counter-plan pretty easily? We can find an opportunity to talk to each other. Let's ask what they want from our kingdom, and see which of their specialty products they're willing to offer in exchange and make a pact or treaty or something."

Gwendal waves his right hand in disgust and summons one of the reserve guards placed outside the room.

"His Majesty appears to be tired. Guide him to his room."

I, the new Prior Maou, am about to unthinkingly allow myself to be guided.

"That's very kind of...hey! Wait a minute, we're not done here yet! That was the king's command, so you gotta obey!"

His glare traumatizes me for life.

"P-*please* obey."

"Don't speak as if you know anything. If they were the type to agree to a discussion, I wouldn't need an amateur to tell me to arrange for one."

"Were you turned down? Well, yeah, I mean, if somebody as self-important as you looked down from your high horse and told someone that you wanted a meeting, I wouldn't blame them for being scared."

Gwendal, who thinks of me as nothing more than graffiti on the wall, is starting to become visibly irritated. Anyone would be pissed off if they were treated like graffiti. The more so if it were for good reason.

"They'd probably listen to me if I went. 'Cause it's not like I'm strong like you guys; any way you look at me, I'm just an ordinary human being."

An avalanche of criticism follows that statement.

"Ordinary Human?! You?!"

"Your Majesty is Mazoku! One in whom resides the black of Mazoku nobility, the true Maou, through and through!"

"Conrart!" Gwendal barks the name of his younger brother, the acknowledged military man. Looks like his irritation has reached the boiling point—on the table, his long fingers twitch as if he were holding a game controller. He's probably trembling with rage. Conrad shows not a hint of tension. What *would* it take to panic him?

"Yes?"

"This pet Maou of yours, is he planning to give the victory to us or the Humans?"

"...That is a difficult question. His Majesty is a personage of rarely-seen caliber. However."

He pushes himself away from the wall in a vigorous motion, gives me a cheerful side glance, and says: "If we are looking for a way to avoid battle, I do have a suggestion."

"What? What?!"

"Here now, calm down. Günter will explain."

My tutor breathes a long long long sigh, obviously reluctant. Is it my imagination, or does even his thick hair lose its gloss and a cloud pass over his radiant beauty?

"We the Mazoku possess a legendary weapon which cannot be wielded by any save His Majesty the Maou. It is said that once invoked, it has enough power to burn the world to nothing...though in reality maybe a small city... In any case, the fact remains that it is a legendary sword: the mightiest ultimate weapon in all of history. Even its name..."

"Ultimate weapon! Melgib, right?!"

"No, Your Majesty, Morgif."

What the heck? A lethal weapon's gotta have Mel Gibson. Gwendal tsks slightly upon hearing that misleading name. He doesn't look pleased.

"The last to invoke it was His Majesty Basilio von Rochefort, the Maou eight generations ago. It was later lost, its whereabouts unknown until just recently when it was d...wh-when its location was...d-d-dis!"

"You found it, right?!"



Wolfram, who was so engrossed in his criticism of me just a few minutes ago, lets his true feelings slip.

"I see, if we let it be known that the ultimate weapon has returned to us under the auspices of the Maou, our neighbors will not dare attack us carelessly. No one has held it for close to a thousand years; they will fear the might of the king who does."

"Is it really that amazing?"

"Records claim that when Morgif's fullest power is unleashed by the absorption of a Human life, it can smash a boulder to pieces, reverse the flow of a river, burn a person to ashes, and make a cow dance in the air."

"A cow?!"

I have the feeling I'm kinda missing the point here, but anyway, I do get that it's a pretty awesome weapon.

"So that means if we can get our hands on this weapon, then our country will be the strongest, right? Then everybody'll be afraid of us and not want to fight us. All right! Then everything will good, right?! Let's dash over and fetch it right now! Where is it? Who's going to go get Melgib?"

"It's Morgif."

"Oh, right."

Günter's eyes are still fixed on the floor. His long lashes tremble.

"It is a very long trip by ship from the Voltaire region here on the eastern edge of Shinma

Kingdom. It was d...d-dis...covered on the savage and barbaric island of Van der Veer in Cimarron..."

"You shouldn't call it savage and barbaric if you've never been there!"

"Th-that's quite true, but, ooooh Your Majesty! I cannot bring myself to give my approval to this plan! Your closest subjects are brought to tears by your great kindness and your compassionate desire to protect your people from the ravages of war."

Uwah, that's mucus, not tears! No, please don't cling to me like that! Ack, not the hand! Don't rub your cheek against my hand! Don't rub your *nose* against my hand—!

"None beside the Maou can take up Morgif. But to have your Majesty cross into the domain of the Humans is akin to throwing meat of the highest quality to a pack of slaving beasts!"

"Stop comparing me to meat, geez!"

"And besides, the beasts wouldn't really care what kind of meat it was—right, Your Majesty?"

"But Your Majesty, Van der Veer is preparing for its annual festival! You will be a target for the islanders as well as enemies from every land!"

"Are you sure they're not just ordinary tourists? Wait a moment, target? What target? Target what?"

Gwendal leaves the room in disgust.

Looking after his impressive figure, I have to admit it to myself: it's quite true that I don't have his dignity or his style. And he really is thinking of the future of this country. But we do things differently. I don't know just now which of us is right or wrong, and I'll probably never know.

Sorry Gwendal, but the Japanese DNA inside me is crying out with its petty bourgeois sense of justice.

"...which is why the effect of Majutsu is weakened in the domain of the Humans. Those skilled in Majutsu would therefore be unable to protect Your Majesty."

I haven't really been listening, but since I can't use Majutsu anyway, it doesn't really matter.

"That's okay. So this Morgif is a sword, right? And since it's the king's ultimate weapon, I bet it's one of those holy swords that you absolutely need to defeat the last boss, like Ragnorak or Excalibur or the Bizen Sword made out of Orichalcum, that you have to go to the heart of some super-complicated dungeon to get, right?"

Günter, Conrad and Wolfram all ask in the same tone: "Holy sword—?"

"I-it's not a holy sword?"

"Ah, Your Majesty is jesting again."

"That's right, Yuuri, what would you want a holy sword for?"

"Your Majesty, it is the sword that belongs to the Demon King, so..."

Of course it'd have to be a demon sword, wouldn't it?

Chapter 2

I have the feeling that I'll be able to hear the ocean if I put this stone to my ear, for it must surely have crossed the ocean to get here from some distant country.

"You can hear the ocean even if you don't have that pressed against your ear—we are traveling on it, after all. Here, Your Majesty, please get up. Or at least decide if you want to get up or go to sleep."

"Woah, it's swaying!"

"Of course. *We are* on a ship."

Oh yeah.

We're travelling by ship to retrieve the strongest, baddest ultimate weapon in the world: the legendary sword Morgif, which can be wielded only by the Maou and is said to be sleeping on Van der Veer Island in the Cimarron domain where pretty much only Humans dwell.

It took a lot of persuading to convince Günter that going disguised as inconspicuous Humans was a better course than sending out the armada and getting attacked. My black hair's been dyed red to avoid suspicion; when Günter saw it, he trembled, eyes filling, and wailed, "My King has..." Yeah, and when did I become your Shibuya Yuuri? I'm not Shibuya Ward's catchphrase, geez.

The lamentation was horrible when he learned that he couldn't go with us—he managed to shatter three expensive-looking glasses in his dismay. But it'd be a total disaster if we went wandering around Human lands with an uber-beauty like you and some girl falls for you. And besides, if I don't have somebody clever stay behind in the capital and cover for me, news might get out that the king isn't around—when I explained all this to him, what I got back was: "Am I so despised by Your Majesty?" Then when I hurriedly told him, like one of those top-flight bosses, that I have no particular feelings of like or dislike for him, the tears came gushing out. I haven't met many people with such a remarkable gap between their looks and personality.

In the end I managed to convince my tutor somehow, and left the country with only Kaku-san, aka Conrad, in tow.

Among the Human kingdoms of Cavalcade, Sondergaard and Hildyard located across the sea from Shinma Kingdom, Hildyard is the only country with which Shinma Kingdom has diplomatic relations. We arrived on foreign soil three days after departing on a merchant ship from a port city in the Voltaire region.

Hildyard has maintained its relationship with Shinma Kingdom despite censure from its neighboring countries, supposedly out of gratitude for aid in the time of its founding. But that's only its official front; the truth is that trade is more profitable than ostracism.

It's one calculating country.

Schildkraut is located on Hildyard's southern tip. If it were an airport, it'd be a hub: ships and people gather here from all over the world, and it's as lively as a map of trade nations in miniature. After purchasing some popular Human products at the market, we boarded a gorgeous passenger ship heading for Van der Veer Island.

At least, that was the plan.

The luxury liner Günter had the local coordinator reserve (apparently there are people associated with the Mazoku placed in various locations in various territories, something of a grand spying scheme), though not on the level of the Titanic, is at least as gorgeous as Pinch-Hitter-Nic(k). It took me twenty seconds to sprint from one end of the ship to the other, so it's probably about a hundred meters or so in length.

Sailors wearing light-blue uniforms work in the cramped space beneath the folded, spotlessly white sails. The passengers coming abroad are dressed in the style of gentlemen and ladies from around the eighteenth century; the amount of luggage their porters are carrying on board is jaw-dropping.

"Wow...the only boat trips I've ever taken were the pirate ship at Hakone and the Mark Twain Riverboat at Disneyland.

"I don't know about the first, but the Mark Twain Riverboat trip would have been pretty short, hmm?"

We're pretty much settled into our roles as Humans by this time: "Young Master." "Stop that, it's not like I'm Natsume Souseki." And "Would you prefer master and servant, then?" "No way, I don't want to be some old geezer. Call me Goinkyo instead." "Wouldn't that make you even older?" we toss back and forth.

In the end, we decide on a loafing rich kid and his steward, and have a porter show us to our room—supposedly the best on the ship. All banter is choked off as soon as we open the door.

"...It's g-gorgeous beyond a doubt, but...um..."

The living room continues back into the bedroom. It's quite spacious. The walls and floor, even the window frames are beautifully decorated. It's not quite a suite at the Ritz, but you'd never think this was inside a boat. Of course there is a bathroom and toilet and other amenities, as well as sofas and a tea table with carved cat's-paw legs. The floor is scattered with intricately-woven rugs.

"Why does it have a double bed? I mean, more importantly—"

"You're late!"

Why is Wolfram sitting so regally *on* the double bed?!

I'm guessing that the gob-smacked look on Conrad's face means that he didn't expect this either.

"From the looks of it, this room is normally reserved for newly-weds. I presume Your

Ma...my young masters are still in their prenuptial period...?"

"...I have no idea who's responsible for this mix-up either."

The next while is devoted to Wolfram being violently seasick, and so the afternoon passed. The second day of my trip on a gorgeous luxury liner is about to start.

"Please get up, Your Majesty, or would you like me to bring you breakfast in bed? A waiter has already set out the table."

A voice still in its death throes comes from beneath the blankets.

"Don't talk about food in front of me..."

"Oh, come on. Let's change, get our faces washed, and go get some food. I'm not seasick at all."

Wolfram, who stalked us to the ship and smuggled himself on board, ended up in front of the toilet as soon as we set sail. Now he's bedridden and refuses to eat or drink anything, even water. He can't even quarrel with me. With his ruffled gold hair straggling down blanched cheeks and eyes lightly closed, he looks like an angel who's fallen to earth and in despair because he cannot return home.

"Isn't there anything at all you want to eat? Bread or ice cream or pudding? Let's at least call room service to get you something to drink. Like milk or orange juice or yogurt, maybe?"

"Blaargh!"

"Sorry! I guess yogurt's having the opposite effect?!"

"Now Yuuri...I mean, Young Master, don't tease the patient. Here, hold still, I'll put in your contacts for you."

The made-in-Shinma Kingdom contacts, developed with all the Mazoku's ingenuity, turn my eyes a light brown. One ordinary red-haired, hazel-eyed Human to go.

"So Wolfram's not very good with boats, huh? I feel kinda sorry for him."

"That's why I told him not to come. But he looks so miserable that I've lost the desire to lecture him."

Just then the door of the neighboring room opens, and someone comes down the corridor: an elegantly-dressed, middle-aged gentleman holding the hand of a little girl who looks around five. He's not as tall as the Mazoku, but he's solidly built, and looks like he still has some years of active duty in him. What duty, I've no idea.

An intrepid smile appears on the gentleman's face beneath his beige mustache, and he slowly walks toward us with his right hand on luxuriant hair of the same color and the hat sitting on top. Then—

"Good morning."

"Woah!"

He sweeps hat and hair off together. The morning sun glistens on his bald head.

I take an involuntary step back. Is this like the sudden coming-out of a wig-wearer or something?!

"I must apologize, my master is not yet used to Cavalcadian greetings."

Conrad nods, smiling, a hand on my back.

"Oh, that was a greeting?"

Contact with foreign cultures is always so full of surprises.

Conrad smoothly engages him in conversation before my awkwardness becomes obvious. As planned, I act like a shy young man from a well-to-do family.

"Are you going to breakfast? My wife, alas, is seasick and resting in our room. Shall we head down together?"

I half-hide behind Conrad as cutesily as I can and shake my head slightly, staring at the floor. It's the only way I have of expressing how I feel about *that* idea.

"As you can see, my master is very shy."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that. When I heard someone took the risk of smuggling himself onto the boat in pursuit of his betrothed, I wondered what sort of an ardent young worthy it was..."

Wolfram, we've become the topic of scandal.

The middle-aged gentleman replaces his hat and wig with a smug expression on his face.

"I never imagined it would be such a cute...ah, your pardon, I'm sure you have your share of troubles. ...Please excuse my belated introduction; I am Hiscruyff of Missinai, and this is my daughter Beatrice."

Cute would be the man's daughter, not me.

She's wearing a pale pink dress, the light brown hair she inherited from her parents in two ponytails. She's looking steadily at me. I feel totally awkward lying in front of a little kid, so I can only leave it to Conrad.

"My master is Mitsuemon from a crêpe silk merchant house in Echigo. I am called Kakunoshin of the same."

"Echigo? Where would that be?"

"It is located to the east of Ecchuu."

"Ecchuu..."

"North of Hida."

"W-Well, you seem to have come from a very distant land indeed."

Total confusion: huge success.

I wanted the "Megumi Freeloader," but Conrad is a fan of Komon-sama. Strangely enough, the sounds of the crêpe silk merchant house seem to echo in my ears.

"Ah so you must be headed for Van der Veer's Fire Festival...?"

"How stupid can you be?!"

The angry, malicious voice comes from somewhere nearby, and I start reflexively toward it. Kaku-san, aka Kakunoshin, apologizes to Hiscruyff and chases after me. We pass the doors of three luxury suites at a run and round the corridor containing the first-class cabins to the deck.

A sailor who looks every inch a man of the sea strikes a boy who appears to be his apprentice. It's probably just the age when people get jobs in this world, but still—the boy looks two or three years younger than me.

Conrad, who seems to have sensed my thoughts, murmurs briefly, "Please do not cause a scene."

"But he's just a kid!"

"Will it be all right if he is not beaten anymore?"

The light brown eyes turned to peer into mine shift completely into his role.

"I declare, Young Master, your whims will be the death of me."

I totally feel like the prodigal son now; the back of my head itches.

"Do apprentices on this ship receive beatings so early in the morning?"

"Shut yer mouth, I do what I want with...ah, my humble apologies for such an ugly scene, sir."

The sailor's attitude changes as soon as he realizes we're above-first-class passengers.

"But what can I do when he makes such stupid mistakes, eh?"

"This din is damaging my master's mood."

"Aaah...is this young gentleman your master?"

Conrad slips something to the sailor—probably money. The man twists his head over his shoulder to look at me. He smirks unpleasantly and rubs his chin.

"Well! I'm sure he is much care-laden. My humble apologies for this unpleasantness, your lordships!

"Enough. Get out of our sight."

He gestures as he leaves, and the boy who was knocked sprawling near the ship's bulwarks bows deeply and runs off. He looks like one of those freckled kids always showing up in American commercials.

"Ugh...so it's all about money."

"Does it pain your conscience or sense of justice? But at least we now know that he's a man who can be bought."

"Yeah, and a jerk who hits children. Geez, now I'm all in a contemplative mood."

"Contemplative?"

"Yeah. When I'm over here I keep wondering—why, of all things, am I the Maou?"

An ordinary high school student sent flying over to another world, sallying forth on a grand adventure—a hero or wizard or prince would be the first thing that came to anyone's mind. But I've been stuck with the job of 'Demon King,' and the weapon I'm questing for is a 'demon sword.'

I lean back against the wooden bulwarks, enjoying the mild ocean breeze. The red bangs caressing my forehead feel like they belong to someone else.

"I kept thinking—I'm so unlucky, what a disaster. But I feel like I finally understand how wrong I was. I mean, there are so many more, well—"

"Unfortunate people in the world?"

Conrad leans forward, crossing his arms, playacting at an end. "Yuuri. You think that child was unfortunate, then."

"But in Japan he would probably have been a junior high first-year student, or maybe even an elementary school kid in the middle of a growth spurt! Children shouldn't be used for labor—even the United Nations and UNICEF say so! And he gets beaten for making mistakes, too—aren't there any conventions on the rights of children?"

"...Even so."

He pulls me up by the hand, and we head back towards the cabins.

"Is it not a little one-sided of you to assume he is unfortunate?"

"Maaaybe..."

There's a happy smell wafting on the air: a scent of fresh-made bread, butter melting in a frying pan, and sizzling bacon.

"I'm actually more concerned about Hiscruyff."

The name brings to mind that eccentric greeting again. Aaah, I was so surprised. The world is a big place.

"He said he was from some city, right? Is it close to here?"

"Missinai is on the northern tip of Hildyard, but...that greeting is used by the upper crust of the Cavalcade nobility."

"It's...um...pretty unforgettable even if you want to forget it, huh?"

So all the elite members of society, instead of a 'how do you do,' glisten and flash at each other? What do all the young men who actually have hair do? They can't all be like Kouji Tomita, can they?!

"Wait, you mean *that* Calvacade?"

"Yes, that one. And that man was quite a master. He may have been playing the part of a doting father, but the hand that was holding his daughter's was covered with sword calluses."

"Sword calluses?! Woah, way to go, cactuses. Well, however good he is, he'd never be a sword master as awesome as you, Con...Kaku-san."

"Oh my, Young Master—sword master! Now you're making me blush."

Back to our roles. We're already at the entrance to the diner.

"Ah, but it's taken me eighty years to come just this far. Anyone would improve if they've been swinging a sword for that long. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, I suppose?"

"Ah-hah, so you've devoted yourself to being a sword master for eighty years, huh? Like Yoshinoya!"

Aaah, now I want to have some of Yoshinoya's beef bowl.

Chapter 3

If Lord von Kleist were Human, he would be wailing 'Oh my God, oh my God!' But since he is neither Human nor American, he is howling "Your Majesty!" at the sky instead.

His long frantic strides take him around and round the wide room. The master of the castle stops as he passes the open door and enters. He looks at Günter suspiciously.

"Günter, you haven't set out for the capital yet?"

"This is no time to be thinking about that! He's disappeared, he's disappeared disappeared disappeared!"

"Calm down. Are you really Lord von Kleist?"

Gwendal coolly takes a step back from Günter. He cannot afford to become involved.

"This isn't about me!" He glares at Gwendal. "It's His Majesty! Wolfram has disappeared—I think he has gone chasing after His Majesty! Aaah, what should I do? This is a disaster! If

anything should happen to His Majesty, how could I ever atone?"

"Don't exaggerate. Wolfram can protect himself—I don't believe he'll be a burden."

"You don't believe he'll be a burden? That selfish Pooh?!"

"Selfish Pooh?"

There is a moment of silence.

Tutor and assistant to the king though he may be, calling someone who was a prince until just a short time ago 'Pooh'—and in front of his own brother to boot—is an impertinence. It would certainly come as no surprise if Gwendal were to take offence.

"...Actually, I've thought so too."

"I-it seems we're in agreement, for once."

And thus was the Alliance of Those Who Have Always Thought of Wolfram as a Selfish Pooh, abbreviated the Pooh Alliance, created.

"Achoo!"

"Gesundheit!" I answer on cue in a conditioned response to Wolfram's cute little sneeze, which sounds like something a manga character might make, as I rummage through my luggage and toss everything out of the clothes chest.

"Aaargh, dammit, it's not here not here not here not here not here not here!"

"What are you looking for?" Wolfram, who finally seemed to have recovered around noon, asks, lying face down on the bed. His feet are on the pillows, and he flails and kicks from time to time.

"I'm pretty sure I put it in here, that metal buckle thing that holds up this cummerbund."

"Humph."

He sounds both disgruntled and disappointed.

I quite understand how he feels. It'd be like someone passing over me and picking an amateur to play a game. Wouldn't it be better to call on me instead of somebody who doesn't even know what letter 'baseball' starts with?

I'm getting ready for a ball—the perfect setting for an ex-prince.

Breakfast started with the captain's salutations; I had tea forced on me while I was walking restlessly around the deck midday; there was an invitation to pseudo-billiards in the game room in the evening and a full-course dinner at sunset; after dinner's finally over we get to take a shower before our attendance is requested at a formal social—no rest on a gorgeous luxury liner! And if the guests in the deluxe suite don't show up, they immediately become the subject of gossip and are accused of being eccentric.

"Wouldn't it have been better to get third-class cabins and stay shut up in our room not attracting attention for the entire trip? When I remember what it's like being in sleeper cars, I'm pretty sure I could've handled a shared room with bunks."

"I can't endure something like that!"

"Yeah, but you weren't even in the plans!"

"Then your plans were flawed from the start."

Sounds like he's closer to his usual self. But even if he's recovered his energy, he can't be set loose with other people. I don't think this proud aristocrat could pass himself off as someone from a crêpe silk merchant house.

"What's in that chest, anyway?"

"Hm? Oh, stuff that Günter insisted I bring along. Things he said would be necessary or come in handy for the trip...a book?"

I tear off the oiled paper wrapper to reveal an important-looking hard-cover book, bound in green mountain goat hide. Its title is written in gold letters, but sadly I can't read Mazoku writing.

"Let me take a look, I'll read it for you...The Dream Begun in Spring, a Diary."

"A diary?! Does he want me to become Ki no Tsurayuki or something? Geez, teachers."

"...I met His Majesty for the first time today. He is many times, many dozen times more wonderful than my limited imagination could ever have conceived."

"What?"

Wolfram turns a page and continues reading loudly.

"Lord Yuuri alighted from his horse, golden ears of wheat his backdrop, and smoothly swept back his jet-black hair with a graceful alabaster hand. He turned to look at me with his glittering, intelligent eyes and spoke."

"Wah! Wait, wait, what the heck is that?! It's not a new diary Günter wants me to keep?!"

"My loyal Lord von Kleist, my true friend, I was able to return because of you."

"I never said that!"



Why do I have to be tortured like this by somebody else's diary? Though I'd be writhing if anyone read my diary out loud, too.

"Yuuri, how are your preparations coming along?...looks like you're pretty well recovered, Wolf. How did you get ahold of Günter's 'His Majesty Love-Love Diary?'"

Conrad peers in from the living room, smiling wryly as he fastens his tie.

"Uuurgh...more like a Sob-Sob Diary."

"Someone must have mistaken it for a new book and wrapped it up. Here, please hurry and change if you don't want to keep listening to it."

"His Majesty considers the kingdom and its people above all. Oh, how fervently I, Günter von Kleist, wish to remain by the side of such a splendid, beautiful king as Lord Yuuri."

"Take me away, get me out of heeeeeere!"

What expression would be on the face of the uber-beautiful intelligentsia if he knew we were reading this?

The tutor looks dreadful.

Straggling strands of hair cling to his pale cheeks below bloodshot eyes, and there are several deep wrinkles between his eyebrows. Any woman within a five-meter radius would certainly have been brought to weeping by his beautiful anguish.

"Günter, do you not have a mountain of duties to attend to?"

"Not that many."

The distinct scent of burning calcium fills Voltaire Castle. Someone has already collapsed moaning within the corridor: it's that pungent.

"Please take a look at the cracks in the joints of this humerus," Günter declares, holding a burnt bone high. There is an obsessed glint in his eyes. "There are two places where these short oblique lines cross these three vertical ones. They signify obstacles. Which means that right now, right this moment, danger is approaching His Majesty. And he is out of our reach!"

Gwendal's long bony fingers twitch unconsciously. It's his only expression of irritation; in all other respects he is his usual ill-humored aristocratic self.

"That's as it may be. Where did that bone come?"

"A cow."

"Hum. If his fortune can be told from a cow's bone, then that youngster must not amount to much."

"Not amount to much? Are you not worried?! He is the Mazoku's star of hope! Do you not think there is a limit even to a pretense of apathy?!"

"I will not tolerate such stench in my castle for stars, moon, or cow. If you're going to burn bones, do it outside. If you want to grill cow, do it with the meat. Do you have any idea how many complaints I've received?"

Putting out the fire resentfully, the worrywart steward hisses, "...Must've gotten one from Anissina, anyway."

Three seconds later, Lord von Voltaire retorts—though only in his mind.

Bones.

Hello, nice to meet you, I was recruited as an extra for the Rokumeikan. It's not the ladies in their dazzling, varicolored dresses or the live orchestra on stage that freeze me for a second as I'm making my awkward way in unfamiliar full formal dress to the ball.

There are a countless number of bones scattered on the floor. I suddenly realize that everyone except us was dropping bird and fish bones on the floor at meals, too. As I stand there watching, the woman at the buffet table right in front of us takes a bite of fried chicken and casually tosses away the bone as crudely as any man.

"Is this the etiquette...?"

"I can think of no other explanation."

The dance hall can easily fit two tennis courts. To reach its center, we have no choice but to cross over all the corpses of the little animals that have disappeared into people's stomachs. They crackle piteously underfoot. What a disturbing dance.

Though I have been liberated from the usual mob of beauties, I feel oddly ambivalent. I should be able to relax more in a place filled with Humans, but instead I'm unsettled and on edge.

Everyone shifts to create a path, curtsying and bowing in greeting. Some men shake my hand. I feel like I've been made police chief for a day—geez, just let me do whatever I want already. By the time I make it to the front of the hall, I quite understand the hardships of being a celebrity. Next time I catch sight of a pro baseball player in the city, I'll just watch them from afar.

Up close, the piano sounds like a xylophone. The violins' strings are too tight, and they're super high-pitched.

"Now that you have come this far, prepare yourself: you'll have to dance."

"Me?! I can't dance! I was in the baseball club until the middle of my third year in junior high! I was a catcher, not a cheerleader!"

"Ah, but the ladies are looking at you rather invitingly."

Woah, it's true. They are looking at me. A few of them are even drooling like beasts.

"A-and these are the dances where the man and woman grapple?—I mean, I've only been to athletic meets in elementary school."

"...'Grapple' is something of an exaggeration. You danced at your graduation party from junior high, didn't you?"

Don't confuse US and Japanese cultures. At my junior high graduation party I threw pizza at my baseball club advisor. That's the only fun memory I have of it.

"What sort of step did you do in elementary school? Waltz? Tango?"

"Oklahoma Mixer and the Chichibu Marching Song."

Two extremes. I'm the one who said not to confuse US and Japanese cultures, but talk about a total Japanese-American mix. About the only thing they have in common is that they're both characteristic of their local cultures. Conrad only tilts his head a little and sets down his drink, looking slightly worried.

"Then let's do the Oklahoma Mixer."

"Do, huh?! No no no, I don't wanna dance with a man!"

"Let me give you a bit of practice so you don't embarrass yourself by fumbling when you have to lead a lady in the dance. It's all right, there are many instances where men are paired; just think of it as a tennis doubles pair."

What unpardonable words. I'm the ten-thousand-years-warming-the-bench reserve, so I'm pretty sensitive to leading. There's no way I wouldn't be able to lead if the girl were a pitcher.

"But I am *not* taking the girl's part."

"It's all right, I've always wanted to try the other part. Here, Young Master...right, it's reversed, so...now put your hand around my waist.

Eeeeeek.

I'm already half-crying, my eyebrows tilted up to my hair; Conrad takes a step, murmuring: left left, right right, left right...is this an eyesight test or something? Right right left left turn turn stop right, catch release bend backwards crackle.

A tiny bone breaks beneath my shoes. This is the dance from hell.

"I-I guess dancing isn't about which part you play, but about who's taller, huh?"

"So it would seem. Are you not glad you're not doing this with Gwendal?"

"I don't...even want to think about that!"

Mr. Hiscruyff is at the center of the hall, decorously wearing his wig. He is turning in what looks like a professional wrestling match with a slender, delicate woman that must be his wife. They're glowing with sweat under the lights and look just like 'The King and I.' Once upon a time in Japan, Matsudaira Ken and his wife...

"Oops."

The music suddenly shifts to a slow tempo, and everyone around us starts getting glued together.

"In a cheek-to-cheek dance, you can just sway."

"Haaah, sway, right. Oh, sorry."

My shoulder just bumped into the neighboring couple. It's the ship's captain and navigator.

Ack! What a coarse pair. For them it's more like beard-to-beard than cheek-to-cheek.

Someone keeps poking my head. I turn to see a large woman with magnificent orange hair smiling at me. She's so buff you can see her muscles even through her clothes. She's wearing silk gloves that go up past her elbows. Her curves, exposed from her shoulders to her back, would be the envy of any outfielder.

"Woah...you have pretty nice biceps there."

"Thank you. May I have this dance?"

Her voice is jazzy and husky. But it's a long way from sexy. I'm sure the request took courage, but I really don't think I can handle this sportsman—er, sportslady.

"Thank you for asking, but, er..."

"Wait a darn minute here!"

Excuse me?

Ladies in elaborate dresses that must have been made with whole store-fulls of lace push through the crowd of people toward us.

"I saw him first. If he's going to dance with anyone, it should be with me."

Another lady in a light-green native costume answers, "His eyes met mine first, which means I should be his partner."

"Wait a minute, I had my eyes on him right at the start, so if he's going to ask anyone to dance, I should be the first."

That was the bone-tossing wildwoman. Now everyone else seems to have gathered up their courage, and there are more cries of "wait a minute!" Yikes, what a scene.

"I'm the one who made up her mind first. So one song, if you please."

"Well, in that case, I conceived of the idea first."

"Not true! Mamilen sensed him with ESP!"

"Yeah, but he really suits me."

"He's the one I've dreamed of. We're fated to be together."

"I would not mind me being last, if thou wouldst consent to a dance with this old warrior."

Woah, we're getting all types in here.

"My my, impressive. But I would have expected no less from my Young Master Mitsuemom. How envious I am."

"What are you talking about, Con-eeer-Kaku-san! You're not going to just leave me to drown in here, are you?"

"Oh? But it's such a pleasure to see my master so sought-after."

His smile is bright and cheerful as can be, even though I know he's totally amusing himself.

A second before Conrad finally says 'well, can't be helped,' a baritone voice that could be used as a weapon in the hands of the ambitious is directed at me from behind the women.

"It appears you are having a difficult time making your decision."

"Mr. Shiny!—er, I mean, Mr. Hiscruyff!"

"I see that there are many who yearn for the company of someone as fascinating as yourself."

Yeah right, if a baseball kid like me is fascinating, they'd all faint if they went to Koushien.

"But my lord Mitsuemom is still young. You must not be used to being so flattered. If I may make a suggestion?"

He spreads his arms expansively, eyes indicating his wife seated in a chair against the wall with a glass tilted to her lips.

"Will you not dance with her?"

With the little lady sitting next to his wife, staying up late tonight and looking rather bored.

She's wearing a sakura-colored dress, her unfastened hair twined with ribbon. Her legs swing back and forth.

"This is Beatrice's first evening party. She's already six; there's a saying in my country that if you dance at your first party in the spring when your age is a multiple of six, your life will be a passionate one. I present myself as one sterling example of such."

Hiscruyff laughs booming, sticking his chest out further than Yul Brynner.

"It must be because of such passionate love that your betrothed would chase you all the way onto this ship as a stowaway. I wish such a life for my daughter, so I hope you will consent to be her first partner."

Shouldn't the normal father be trying to keep men as far away from his daughter as possible? Foreigners nothing. These people from another world are impossible to understand.

"Now then, Young Master, go up to the lady and say 'May I have this dance?' or 'May I have your hand for this dance'—something properly smooth and dandy-like."

"A-all right."

As I turn towards the little girl's chair, the ladies disperse with ill humor. One of them tsks and snaps loudly enough to hear, 'So he prefers little girls?' Absolutely not. I kneel in front of Beatrice and say in my manliest voice:

"Miss, please ready your hands."

Dammit! That's the hand-clapping patter...

She bounces off the chair and heads for the center of the floor. Very proactive—she must take after her father. The song is a slow-tempo waltz, easy to dance to. But because I'm so far bent over, I end up with a horribly jerky step.

"Is your hair dyed?"

Her large eyes are the color of the marble in a ramune bottle (oooh, I miss them!), and hold not a trace of malice. With eyes so clear looking up at me, I can't even think about lying.

"Yes it is, how did you know?"

"Because it doesn't suit you."

Children are so cruel.

"Tell me about your father. Beatrice, what kind of a person is he?"

"Someone who would throw away everything for love."

"...I see, so he's a pretty cool guy."

He must tell her that every day. Looks like this father-daughter pair aren't much for cross-examination. Beatrice turns bashful. The sparkle in her marble eyes turns them the color of star sapphires.

"You're kinda cool, too."

"Me?"

She lets go of me as the triple-time comes to an end and runs to cling tightly to her father's waist. Mr. Shiny lifts his daughter up high, heaping so much praise on her that it would set any Japanese person's teeth on edge.

"That was fantastic, Beatrice! That's my little princess! It was very elegantly danced."

"Like a queen?"

"Of course, you are always a queen. You and your mother are my pride and joy."

I'm embarrassed just listening to them; sweat runs down my face and neck. I unthinkingly wipe at it with a fist. Oops.

"...Ah..."

The contact in my right eye moves.

Not good.

If I'm exposed as a Mazoku here, they'll beat me up and chuck me overboard. A melody like something you'd hear at the New Year starts. It's the famous 'Spring Ocean.'

"Conra...argh, geez, where the heck is he?"

Lord Weller is chatting with someone at a table near the piano.

Of all people, it's the woman who made a move on me earlier: Miss Biceps of the ideal outfielder body. His taste is rather...er, make that really radical. But there are varied and far-ranging preferences in the opposite sex. Or maybe in Shinma Kingdom, such women are much admired? I mean, this is the country where I'm supposedly beautiful. I wouldn't be surprised if they criticized people with nice bodies like Ichirou and Shinjou as being too exotic. As for me, well, Lady Cäli is more my type.

They look pretty intimate with his arm around her shoulders.

"I need your assistance, Con...Kaku-san!" I yell silently towards them, before slipping alone out of the hall.

Wanting a teammate to be successful in love is an expression of friendship.

In the twenty-four hour time system I'm familiar with, it would be ten o'clock at night. The deck is covered in darkness. The tension drains slightly out of my entire body as I walk along it. Gentle waves strike and brush against the bottom of the ship. It's odd, but peace slips into my mind as I look out at the pure black sea.

Now that I think back on it, there was not a trace of anything black other than the tightly-curved shadows at our feet in that brilliant, dazzling hall.

A flame wavers in the distance. Must be the guard ship that's been tailing us all the way from Schildkraut.

The pain in my right eye grows sharper. I trot around the corner to get back to the room as fast as I can so I can get it out.

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

I crash hard into someone as I enter the dimly-lit corridor. That shock delivers the fatal blow.

"Ack! The scale—the scale—!"

Has fallen out of my eye.

"I'm so sorry, my lord, have I hurt you?"

"Don't move!"

He freezes in a conditioned response.

"This is the first time in my life I've dropped my contacts. And right now is the first time in my life I've had to search for my contacts. Could you shine your lamp on the floor? If it's not at your feet, kneel slowly and feel for it with your hands."

"Ye-yes sir. But what kind of a thing is a contact...?"

I calmly cover my right eye and brush the floor with my left hand.

"Um...is your face injured?"

"No—hey, isn't it Freckles?"

Turns out the one who delivered the blow is the sailor apprentice with the freckled face designated for the peanut commercial spot. He clutches his head in heartfelt apology and starts searching with me.

"You saw me this morning in such a strange state, and now...I'm really really sorry. I was on patrol, but I didn't think anyone was around."

"Mmn, well, it's fine, contacts falling and people looking for them seems to happen in shoujo manga a lot."

With a lot of falling in love with the one resigned to being late to help search for them. I'm

really glad that today isn't the school opening ceremony, 'cause I really don't want a foreign love in a place like this.

"Must be tough being an apprentice, when you have to patrol on your own so late at night. And it's not really worth it to put in much effort when your boss is such an ass, huh?"

"But I fell from the ladder because I was daydreaming. Oh, and he was the one who taught me how to get on and off. That's why he was angry. I don't blame him at all. There's a lot to remember, and I'm too dumb."

When I look up, the boy is smiling. Rather surprised, I sit back on my knees, resting my left hand.

"Don't blame him? When he hit you like that?"

"It happens to everyone when you're an apprentice. It's the same for all the sailors. This is my first voyage, and I'm really happy that it could be on such a fantastic ship as this one."

"...You're...happy?"

"Oh, yes!"

Just half a day ago I was thinking that he was unlucky. I decided that he was to be pitied. I suddenly feel ashamed of myself, and look down to hide my expression.

"I dream of steering a boat as big as this one someday...oh, my lord, there's something glittering on your chest!"

It's true, there's a small brown glass chip clinging to the side of a button. Which means I've descended to the level of one of those people who goes around saying 'my glasses, my glasses' when they have their glasses perched on top of their heads?!

Embarrassment times two.

I cough evasively and stand with a short 'thanks.'

"See you later, Apprentice."

"I'm Rick, my lord."

"See you later, Rick. Great job with the patrolling. Keep up the good work!"

I rush away without waiting for a reply and fly into our room.

Why am I such a simpleton? Why can't I just shut up and observe? Deliberate on the issue, for once? It's like deciding the other team's secret ace is a third-rate player after a single at-bat. It doesn't make for a good catcher or a great king. When it comes to baseball...well, I'm at something of a roadblock right now, but my path to kingship's just started.

I guess my career as Maou is still interim...well, provisional interim.

Sounds like a pasta lunch special.

"Wolfram! My contact just fell out, it totally caught me off guard!"

"Were you dancing?"

The ex-prince comes out of the bedroom in a fluffy white bathrobe and a towel wrapped turban-like around his head.

"...Why're you dressed like a lady who's just stepped out of the bath?"

"I asked if you danced," he demands sharply with a glower, looming over me with arms crossed. Oooh, we're in the middle of a selfishness advisory alert.

"Well, of course I danced, since that was the point of the thing. It's not like I went to a cooking class or a film preview or something. What about it? Why're you snapping at me like that?"

"You skank!"

"Wha?!"

What does it mean to call a guy a skank?! I do a search in my brainular encyclopedia for a corresponding entry. No matter how slowly it turns, it's not so different from going through the pages of a real encyclopedia. Skag, skald...skank.

"Oh, rhythmic dancing?!"

I'm a bit concerned about that preceding 'skald'...scald?

"So that was praise? Well, hey, I'm not only light on my feet, I can do a wicked throw to second base, too."

"I'm calling you a traitor!"

"That again? What the heck? Where and when, and who's supposed to have betrayed whom? When exactly did this happen, anyway? I haven't betrayed anyone, and I don't think I ever will betray anyone, either! Betraying someone means that you break trust with them, so I think I'd know if I betray anyone! But you're still going to claim that you've been betrayed by me?!"

Have I got all the conjugations of the word yet?

"Look here! So you've got good looks, I'll give you that, even though you're a total wimp on the inside. I'm sure there are lots of people who've got their eyes on you. But don't tell me you're planning to take all of them up on it. If you have no virtue, you're totally unfit to be a noble, no matter how cute you are!"

"Woah, wait a minute! You're supposed to be the cute one! And what is this thing about virtue..."

The impact occurs right in the middle of this important question.

Chapter 4

It's been about six years since he last stepped inside his own kitchen.

Gwendal's feet stop at the door. He really doesn't want to have anything further to do with this.

"Günter! What are you doing in my kitchen?!"

...'And here he comes' is the thought conveyed quite clearly by Lord von Kleist's eyes. He is standing in front of a cauldron filled with boiling oil with a headband around his forehead.

"Fortune-telling again?"

"Yes. If I can sense the dangers His Majesty faces, if I can be of any help to him at all..."

"This is useless."

There wouldn't be any way of helping them even if he could foresee the dangers, since no sorcery would be able to reach them in the middle of the ocean. But faced with the fresh blue-black bruises under Günter's eyes, Gwendal loses the energy to confront him with those facts. His gaze falls to the oil.

"...What are you planning to do?"

"Drop a baby mouse into this boiling cauldron of oil."

The intelligent, beautiful and dignified tutor raises a hapless little white mouse by the tip of its tail. His ferocious smile exposes the true Mazoku within: a demonic beauty that captivates and beguiles all.

All of which is inconsequential to Gwendal.

His voice is a low sardonic rumble that would surely prostrate all who heard it. "Well, well. I suppose a rodent will suffice for a king such as that."

The corners of his lips curve derisively.

"Of course! What a foolish mistake! How could a mouse predict the journey of our noble exalted king? Oh Gwendal, what should I do? Well, for now—" Günter raises his other arm swiftly. "—a kitten should do."

The spotted cat shivers, dangling from a grip illustrated in pet books as an example of 'how not to hold your cat.'

The cool-headed, handsome cynic (ladies, discuss) unexpectedly snaps.



"Stop! Stop right now!! How dare you mistreat a kitten like this? Look, it's so frightened that it's meowing 'meh meh!' You poor thing, it's all right, I would never let him do something so horrible to you—"

"...Gwen...you..."

"Günter...you bastard..." The tutor pales at the voice that seems to rumble up from the ground. "If you ever mistreat a kitten like that again, I will have your head."

And do what with it?

This is no time for verb conjugations—where is the life vest?!

I peer under the bed. Apparently there was just the one impact.

"See, look, we're going to end up like the Titanic! We must've struck an iceberg!"

"But we're traveling on warm current."

"We must've hit an iceberg in the warm current, then."

There are screams and the footsteps of a great many people from the hall and diner. Sounds like they're already panicking. I wonder if that orchestra will play a last hymn as we're sinking?

"Stop standing about, Wolfram! Get your trousers and coat and run! Dammit, I can't believe Conrad's not here at a time like this..."

"Yuuri!"

The door slams open with enough force to tear it from the jamb, and Conrad rushes into the room. The frozen look on his face doesn't seem Conrad-like at all. His sleeve is stained with spilled wine.

"Thank goodness you got back here safely. Though Josa did say you were fine."

"Josa? Is Josa the woman who looks like she could win a golden glove as a center? Look, Conrad, sorry, but I don't really have time to ask if everything went well with Miss Biceps right now. Is this ship sinking? Is it half-sunk already?!"

His expression says he has no idea what I'm talking about. Guess it's not an iceberg. Are we stranded, then? Or is it an evil illusionary giant squid that has already devoured ten fishermen?

"I don't think we're sinking—it's worse. Wolfram!"

"What?"

"Do you have your sword?"

"Yes!"

His cheeks, pale with seasickness and displeasure, visibly gain color as he flushes with excitement. He must be looking forward to the chance for some fighting. Does he enjoy the prospect of crossing swords that much?

"Good. Then the two of you, hide here."

"What are you doing?!"

Conrad pushes us into the closet. The cane that he's carried all this way is in his hand. He draws it in a single smooth motion, and steel flashes. I didn't know it was a sword cane. He shifts the blade behind him and goes to one knee, leaning in close to say in a low voice, "Please listen quietly. This ship is under attack by sea robbers."

"Pirates?!"

"Yes. A great many of them have already broken in."

"Then you should hurry up and hide too, Conrad!"

"What are you talking about?" I gulp at Lord Weller's smile. "This is why I'm here."

The exchange takes only a second, and his hand is on the door.

"I'll hold them from the deck for as long as I can. We want to give them the impression that everyone has fled from this room, so please keep as quiet as you can. Don't anger them. If anything should happen to you, Günter and our people will weep."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"You'd weep for me too, right?"

His eyes soften, just a little.

"In that case, let us meet again in another place."

I don't have a chance to ask him what he means. Wolfram moves to leave, his slender sword in his hand.

"I'll fight too! Do you have no faith in my skill?!"

"I do. That is why, Wolfram, I have entrusted His Majesty to you."

The stubborn pretty boy finds himself at a loss for words. He can't refute that trust. I remove my formal evening jacket and toss it aside, then roll up my sleeves and put my arms around the third son's shoulders.

"Well then, leave your brother to me!"

"Please look after him...Yuuri."

In the moment Wolfram looks away, he wraps an arm around my neck and draws me close to whisper briefly, "Please forgive me, if I do not return."

"Wha..."

He closes the double doors and walks away. His brisk footsteps are quickly swallowed into the pandemonium of the distant deck.

He has gone to battle, those disquieting words laden with meaning left behind.

All is chaos for a little while afterwards. There are the metallic clangs of sword clashing against sword, the sounds of vases and plates shattering, of rushing footsteps and screams and cries that make me want to cover my ears.

Wolfram and I breathe quietly, listening intently for any hint of what is happening outside.

Quiet falls by degrees, and before long the screams and bellows subside.

I recall a Western film I saw on TV half a year ago, right before I took my exams. When the children who were in hiding venture outside, no one remains: neither the enemy nor their father, after so much tumult and violence.

Even though Wolfram could not have guessed at my feelings, his hand falls on mine. We huddle together in the cramped space of the too-small-to-be-called-a-walk-in closet, shivering.

No, I'm the only one who's shivering.

Wolfram is a soldier, after all. Even if he's not used to playing such a dangerous game of hide-and-seek, it can't be his first time.

"...Are you okay, Yuuri?"

"O-of course I am!"

I grip the hand touching mine, closing my eyes, and hang my head.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

He's not laughing at me, is he?

It's just...it's not just that I'm frightened, not even that I'm scared stiff—it's this silence, this tension, that is unbearably painful...

My roommate seems to read my mind. He whispers, "Like Conrart said, don't do anything rash if we're found. They're not going to kill you if you don't resist, 'cause you've got such good looks."

"Then you'd better not do anything either. You're several times cuter than me. No one would kill someone as pretty as you."

"No way. I am a warrior of the Mazoku; if I don't fight, I can't be allowed to live."

"That's stupid."

"Shush!"

There's the click of the doorknob turning, followed by the slam of the door being forced open. Someone steps into the room.

"All the valuables 'ave already been taken, eh? 'Ave they escaped?"

"No chance. We've already confirmed that none of the deluxe suite passengers were on deck. He knows all of the passengers on this ship. It's another matter if they've gone overboard, but none of the rich men on this pleasure cruise have that kind of courage."

There are two of them.

One speaks in a tank-like rumble that sounds like he has a caterpillar wandering around the back of his throat, and the other has a fighter jet voice so shrill that it hurts the ears.

"These are supposed t'be rich men? Looks like they don't got much on 'em." Tank.

"Still, the cost of staying in this here deluxe suite for a night could get you a year's passage in the third-class cabin." Fighter Jet.

"Daaamn, I wanna be in their shoes." Tank.

"Don't be an idiot. Look in the bedroom too." Fighter Jet...I'm starting to feel like I'm playing army chess here.

The creak of the floorboards in front of the bed indicates that they're right next to us.

"Oh yeah, what happened to those brave fellas?"

He's talking about Conrad!

The tips of my toes hit the door when I unconsciously lean forward.

"Hey! Is something in there?!"

Oh no!

We're seconds away from the fate of ninjas in a historical drama here: the ones who get stabbed by a spear while they're hiding above the ceiling or beneath the floor eavesdropping on a secret conversation. "Echigoya, didst thou hear that sound?"

"'Twas but a mouse, Lord Governor." Oh yeah, there's an idea.

I ask for Wolfram's opinion in a barely-audible whisper. "Maybe we can pretend we're little animals."

"Maybe. How about a negroshinoyamakishy?"

Neg...what the heck?! That CD of animal sounds I was always listening to when I was a kid didn't have anything as hard as that. I mean, *Earth* doesn't have anything like that.

This is no time to be wondering what kind of an animal it is. We're too big to be mice, and it'd be weird if we were keeping a cow in the closet. There's just one thing left in my repertoire, so let's try cat.

"Me-meow."

Tank and Fighter Jet instantly react.

"It's a zomosagori dragon!"

"Don't zomosagori dragons eat people even when they're tiny?! We can't take it on alone, get the others!"

Dragon?! Dragon, as in a relative of the dinosaur?!

Wolfram covers his face with his palms in defeat.

"This is bad, they're getting the wrong impression! When did I make a dragon sound?! I was going for a cute cat..."

"Cats are supposed to go 'meh meh'!"

"That's sheep!"

The situation takes a turn for the worse when about eight people surround us.

"We're opening it, you all ready?!"

No, we're not all ready.

Silver glitters next to me.

"Wolfram, don't—"

The doors are opened to their fullest. While my eyes are dazzled by the light rushing in, Wolfram cuts off one person's arm and grazes another's stomach. But the remaining six advance on him from behind, swinging huge cutlasses.

"Wolfram! Don't, there're too many of them!"

"Shut up!"

"I'm begging you, Wolf! Stop it...that's an order!"

He freezes and without looking at me allows the sword to drop.

The empty metallic clank of the sword echoes in the room.

Torches burn everywhere, as if we were holding the fire festival a little early. It's as bright as noon, so bright that it illuminates the pirates' ship parked alongside ours.

The deck, where most of the passengers and crew have been gathered, smells like that show where they hack up tuna. From the looks of it, there's been bloodshed on both sides.

The pirate chief appears to be in great humor up on his platform of stacked wooden boxes.

"Y'all are lookin' mighty fine tonight," he addresses the passengers through a megaphone, holding it with his pinky sticking out. It's a mike performance.

Our eight-men entourage herds us into a group of POWs. Wolfram is still dressed like a madam who's just stepped out of her bath, and I've left my jacket behind. Though it's spring, the ocean wind is cold.

I spot Conrad and Hiscruyff in the group of sailors and male passengers—which includes Miss Biceps, for some reason. She must have fought as courageously as any man. All three are standing on their own feet, and don't seem to have sustained any major injuries.

Sorry Conrad, you tried so hard to hide us, I apologize silently to him. It wasn't your brother's fault, it was mine one hundred percent. Oh, but I have some good news, too. My imitation repertoire's increased by one. Zomosagori dragon. It'd surprise even Edoya Nekohachi.

I struggle in the grip of the pirate holding me, trying to get to them, but he seizes both of my arms along with the inside of my collar and drags me up to the chief.

"The deluxe suite passengers, eh?"

"That's right, Chief."

I look up the wooden box, and my mouth drops open. I have a hard time closing it. Part of it is curiosity—this is my first pirate after all, but mostly it's because he's so mind-bendingly different from the way I imagined pirates since I was a little kid. They're not wearing shirts with vertical stripes. They're also nothing like the pirates from Peter Pan or the Caribbean. Doesn't look like they can stretch their arms and feet like rubber, either.

He's rather short, but has broad shoulders and a thickly-muscled chest. His silver-blond beard, almost white, starts all the way from his sideburns. His ruddy face has an old scar across one cheek—in short, he's a magnificent example of a man of the sea.

But he's wearing...yes, that is what it is from any angle—a sailor uniform.

Why a sailor uniform?! Well, I guess pirates are sailors too, but why a gathered skirt?! A white-and-light-blue sailor uniform of the kind that schoolgirls wear in Japan?!

The shock drains all the strength from my knees, and I plop to the ground on my behind. In his left hand, the one not holding the megaphone, glints a wide steel blade.

Sailor uniform and...cutlass.

"My sympathies, young sir, but don't be afraid. We are pirates with a pedigree, we are, and we don't go 'round killin' our guests."

That drawl—a Southern accent?

"Course, we make an exception for them as put up a fight. They can scream and drop dead, for all we care. All the heroes on board quieted right down in front of the ladies, har har."

So in short, they're holding the women and children hostage?

"I hear you're on your honeymoon, an' want to be sold together."

Unwinding his turban, Wolfram asks me, "Honeymoon?"

"Don't know anything about it," I reply from my position on the floor, not yet recovered from the shock of the sailor uniforms.

Still with his pinky sticking out, the chief brings the megaphone to his mouth.

"Now, will the ladies please move next to me! You'll be workin' on my ship till you meet your new lords and masters in your high-falutin' new homes!"

New what? Is that pirate-speak for husband? Does he have a side business running a marriage-consulting office or something? But this is the age of equal-opportunity employment, and men and women both have the right to be employed. The women are driven across the ramp, weeping in anguish.

"Yar. Passenger from the deluxe suite, you look like there's somethin' crawlin' up your throat."

"...You said you were pirates with a pedigree...!"

From ten meters away Conrad makes a downward gesture with both hands as if he knows how close I am to an eruption. Softly, softly?

Oh, hold it down, hold it down?

I choke the words back down.

"...So, pirates, huh?...I guess you must have buffet breakfasts...?"

"We don't eat breakfast."

Damn it.

Conrad's right, I have to hold myself back here. Being the only complainer won't get me anywhere. If I make a wrong move, I'll be chucked overboard, and they'll have to bear the consequences. And I have to think about the other passengers, too.

I can't indulge in my petty sense of justice when it could lead to people getting hurt in a big way. I can't...I can't, but...

The chief puts a hand on a keg and says as his skirt hem flutters in the wind, "Now, next! Which of the children'll sell for a good price? Bring 'em forward!"

"You're going to sell them?!"

A young girl wails like a broken alarm as she's dragged away from her mother.

"Granmama—!"

I reflexively look around for a grandmother. None around.

"Damgranmamaaaa!"

Was she swearing at her mother?! Young lady, that's a bit crass.

Wolfram snorts with disdain. "Humph, Human baby talk is so offensive."

"Baby talk?"

"She's calling for her 'beloved mother.'"

Hahah, so that means something like 'dear mammy?'

The other children are bawling too, in a continuous chorus of screams.

The Humans' wails rise up into the moonless, murky sky with the light of their torches.

I've seen a scene like this before—yes, in that late-night movie before the exam. I sat there tucked into the heated table with my reference books spread out in front of me, crying at the TV.

I cried and cried at the irrationality of people killing people and couldn't stop until it woke up my dad.

Wiping my eyes and dripping nose with a wet ball of pocket tissue, he asked me, so smoothly that he deserves an Academy Award himself: "What would you do?"

His tone was as light as if he were asking 'Who do you like better, Mac or Sosa?'

What would you do? Can you do what is needed?

I can.

"...Wait, you...!"

The expression on Conrad's face says: I knew it would turn out like this.

The pressure of the magma just barely bottled beneath the crater has increased in proportion to the force holding it down. Can I finally release the eruption that I spent so much effort suppressing a few minutes ago?!

The Turkey Marsch has already passed its midpoint, and the piano barrage is right at hand.

"Listen, dammit—!!"

The chief casts a brief sidelong look down at me, but immediately shifts his attention back to his underlings. I'm just a prisoner of war, after all, and he has no intention of taking me seriously.

"Wait a minute, why are you taking the women and children over to that ship?! What the hell are you planning to do? You claim to be pirates with a pedigree, but you're just simple robbers! You're going to take all the money and goods and run away, aren't you?! Selling women and children makes you no better than beasts!"

"We're not robbers, we're pirates."

"That's not the point!"

My jaw quivers from the blood rushing up into my cheeks and ears. The shaking spreads the length of my arms into the tips of my fingers and beats a Morse Code down the sides of my thighs. The blood heats my eyes, and the backs of my eyeballs hurt from the pressure.

I'll probably get myself killed, cut down by that wide cutlass. Or maybe it won't be a clean strike and I'll be left to writhe in agony from my wounds.

Still.

"Listen to me! International laws forbid slave trading—that's something even kids in elementary school know! Even if you've never heard about it before, it's common sense—you should come to the same conclusion if you just think about it a little! Yeah, sure, I know you're the chief, and you might be more distinguished than the rest of these guys, but that's just your job status. What we're talking about is human existence! All people are equal, which means you're the same as them! So even if you occupy this ship, you have no right to sell off these women! 'Heaven makes no man better than another'—that's a good saying, you should remember it! Fukuzawa Yukichi is a great man! So great that his portrait

is on the 10,000-yen note in Japan!"

The chief waves his megaphone and calls up four of his underlings.

"Hey Chief, I don't know much about the area, but I'm guessing all the pirates around here do stuff like this, huh? Do you really think that it's all right for you to do it just because everybody else does it too? Well, you're wrong! Come on, be a manly pirate who steals money and goods without harming anyone—that's how you make yourself a righteous man of the sea. You'll become the first chivalrous thief of the sea, praised by friend and foe alike!"

"Bring 'im, he'll sell for a good price. Even if it's just the one eye, it's almost black."

"You're one of those men who just doesn't listen, aren't you! Geez!"

His wife must not read maps.

Meanwhile, more than half of the women and children have already been transferred to the other boat, and towards the tip of the wide deck is a familiar head of beige-colored hair. The princess with the ramune-marble eyes who danced with me is at the very end of the children's line.

She nimbly and forcefully flings off the hand on her shoulder as if avoiding the touch of something dirty.

Blood mounts on the pirate's face, and he thrusts away the small body.

"Beatrice!" Hiscruyff yells.

She's still wearing the airy sakura-colored dress she had on while dancing the waltz with me. The ornaments twined into her hair sparkle as she loses her balance and tumbles backwards, right over the low wooden railing.

"Watch ou...!"

There's nothing beneath but ocean. The ocean opening its black mouth in anticipation.

Several people dash toward her, but I'm the first to arrive. I grasp her arm. Her weight drags me down, and I lean back hard against it. Conrad and Wolfram come rushing over. And probably Hiscruyff, too.

"Hold on...Beatrice...take my hand!"

Beatrice, still dangling by one arm, looks up at me with those eyes that don't quite transform into star sapphires. The eyes of a girl who has a tiny bit of admiration for me.

"It's all right."

"...What's...all right?"

They grab my shirt and belt and hips.

"If I can't see my father and mother anymore, then it's all right if I fall."

"...Don't..."

Don't say things like that.

A girl who's going to dance with lots of wonderful men and fall in passionate love and grasp happiness with both hands should not say something like that, not with such clear eyes.

She should not be allowed to say something like that.

Several strong arms pull us up, and Beatrice's father holds her tight. I tumble awkwardly onto my behind and lie face-up on the planks staring at the clouds flowing across the night sky.

A long thick needle stabs into my head, as if it's become a lightning rod conducting a bolt of lightning down throughout my entire body in a charged rush, numbing me and heating me and flooding me with ecstasy.

My heart pumps blood at twice the speed, and the exact location of its beating becomes pinpoint-clear.

My hippocampus sounds a warning, but adrenalin bursts like champagne popping its stopper.

In the depths of my semicircular canals, I catch a single verse of a beloved song.

Summon...

Summon...who?

And I know nothing more.

Chapter 5

An impossible impact jolts the deck and everyone upon it.

Rumble rumble.

A subterranean tremor? But they're floating on gentle undulating waves, not on land.

Yuuri, gaze fixed downward, ignores Conrad's proffered hand and walks forward on unsteady feet as everyone looks around for the source.

He lifts his eyes when he reaches the approximate center of the deck and stares sharply at the man right in front of him with the one black eye not obscured by contacts.

"...Yuuri?" Wolfram calls, forgetting his alias, but Yuuri doesn't seem to hear.

Taken aback, he grabs Yuuri's hand. With the exception of his index finger, it's icy cold.

"Conrart, he..."

"Yes. But it is out of our hands now."

Perhaps not even Yuuri can control it.

"...You attack a helpless ship, destroying and plundering all. You insist on following the path of evil."

Both his voice and tone have changed. It's really too bad he has no topknot.

"Rather than engaging in honorable combat, you take prisoners with cowardly tricks. You even dare turn your blades upon the weak and claim them as your possessions."

Rumble rumble rumble.

The noise accompanying the tremors seems to be approaching rather than getting louder.

Taken aback by the transformation in their young prisoner, the pirates gather around their chief looking for direction. Yuuri's burning index finger snaps to point right at the bearded old man in the sailor uniform.

"You will pay for your impudence!"

Those forceful words, coming from someone who is usually agog at everything, seem to belong to someone else altogether. In fact, they could even rival Gwendal's manner for kingliness.

He's posed exactly like a model.

"O fools who have no pride as seamen! I have no desire for the taking of lives, but you leave me no other choice: I will cut you down!"

Wolfram scowls. This is a humiliating memory for him.

"He got me with that, too."

"It was pretty harsh, huh?"

"But this is different from then. We are in the territory of the Humans, the Elements should be limited here."

"That concerns me too, but..."

Magical power is intrinsic to the soul. Only those born with it are able to form a covenant with the Elements of the natural world, to command and manipulate them in order to perform sorcery. But this is the territory of the god-worshipping humans, and the Particles that obey the Mazoku are extremely sparse.

Though if he's really planning to cut them down, using a sword would work just as well.

"Judgment!"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble.

The pirates near the entrance to the cabin scream, their voices shrill with fear.

The source of the rumbling is now revealed.

They advance onto the deck at top speed and begin crawling up the bodies of their chosen pirates.

Crawl?! Screams fill the area.

Rattling bits of animal bones, the scattered leftovers from the passengers' meals and discarded remains from the kitchen, swarm the entire surface of the deck floor like insects or mice or hermit crabs. From tiny bird- and fish-bones to the ribs and enormous craniums of cows, every single bone has come seeking its revenge.



"Woah...th-that is the first time I've seen sorcery in such bad taste..."

"Gyaaah, they're coming! Conrart, they're heading in this direction! Do something! Do something!"

Wolfram jumps about like a lobster on a hotplate at the grotesque scene. Bones break apart into sharp fragments beneath his frantic feet.

"Don't move, keep still. Think of it as letting a scorpion or poisonous spider pass."

"Agh! They're they're they're climbing!"

"Keep your composure."

Rather difficult for anyone who doesn't have nerves of steel.

The only reason the passengers and crew are quiet is because most of them have already fainted. The pirates are blubbering and howling in agony under the attack. They're being scratched and chewed and stuck through, their mouths filled with other people's half-eaten discards.

The pirate chief has tumbled down from the box platform with chicken bones thrust up his nose and into his ears. He's fallen to his knees in his terror and is trying to crawl away from Yuuri.

"H-he's the devil, the devil—!"

"Devil?! Do you yet fail to recognize my face?"

In front of him is the word "justice," formed not from people standing in marching band formation, but from bones.

He is not the devil, but the Demon King.

The women watching from the deck of the pirate ship cheer in the light of the torches.

"It's a ship, it's the Cimarron patrol ship!"

Yuuri's fiery, glittering right eye picks out the light over the waves.

Scattered dry ruptures come from the bone army as his will leaves it. The bones stop moving.

The Maou turns to the pirates with all appropriate dignity. "Repent of your actions, and be prepared to atone with the ultimate punishment!"

He sways and starts to pitch forward.

"...Which sentence I will pass at a later date."

All present are certain that they will have nightmares that night.

Chapter 6

The Poljushko Polje has been running nonstop through my head.

Not the version from my kindergarten athletic meet, but the one the tough old Russian guys sing with vodka in one hand: the Gorky Park Chorus edition.

Though there probably isn't a chorus by that name.

My body floats in pleasant warmth at the boundary between dream and consciousness. The stream of sunlight pouring down on my face turns the darkness beneath my eyelids pure white.

I finally wake up when my face is shaded by night descending again. I pull my cheek away

from Conrad's chest.

"...Russian folk song..."

"What, are you pondering the problem of the Cold War?"

"No no, that's already over."

The second son, who left the United States of America fifteen years ago, murmurs admiringly, "Oh, really?" The third son is standing in the doorway, still in his bathrobe.

His beautiful eyebrows are knit in an exaggerated frown.

"This is a nightmare."

"Who's having a nightmare? Me?"

"No, I am."

"Wolfram, what are you so mad about?...oh, have I done something again? Something amazing or awful?"

"Done something? You mean you don't remember?! Any of that?!"

Wolfram slides from his reclining position against the door to the floor, head tilted back in defeat.

"What a lucky fellow you are."

"Wha...?! I-I've done something so terrible that I'm lucky for not remembering it?! Wait, where is this again?! Who am I?—I mean..."

There's a rather significant difference between this tiny, dim little 6ft by 9ft room and the deluxe suite. The rhythmic swaying hasn't stopped, so we must still be on the ocean. I'm pretty sure even the third-class cabins have bunk beds, but this room has no furniture at all. The window is barred, and the wooden floor and walls are discolored and peeling.

"Why're we in a prison?...What did I do? How long have I been asleep? I was preaching to the sailor uniforms, and someone was about to fall into the ocean...Beatrice, it was Beatrice! What happened?!"

Gripping Conrad's jacket, I suddenly realize that he's still in his evening wear. It's stained with spots of rusty brown, testimony to the ferocity of that battle.

"Let me answer your questions one at a time. First, Beatrice is fine and with her parents. You rescued her, then punished the pirates with magic of unearthly power. Actually, if you think about it, this ship is of Hildyard origin, which means most of its meat would have come from animals fed on fodder exported from our kingdom, which would probably have been absorbed into the calcium. That's why it worked so well."

...What the heck is he talking about?

"Anyway, it was thanks to Your Majesty that they were crushed. After that a Cimarron

patrol ship arrived in a hurry and bound up all the pirates. You've been sound asleep for almost two days now. When that violet outside the window changes to blue, we will welcome another new night, and people will begin to turn their dreadful experiences into conversation pieces to go with their drinks at one of those parties. I do have one request, however."

He cups my cheek and pulls down gently.

"Take your contact out before you go back to sleep."

Nurse smile: zero dollars.

"But why are we locked up in here? Ah...I'm not, you know, trying to brag or anything, but um, I *did* save everybody, right? Even if I scared a few people, the pirates would've escaped before the patrol ship got there if I hadn't done anything. Right?"

With a 'cargo' of human slaves on board. Including me and Wolfram.

"That's not all. The escort ship took significant damage as well, and all of the lifeboats on this ship were destroyed. They were probably planning to set fire to the ship as they leave and sink it. Killing everyone."

Including Conrad.

His explanation is completely devoid of emotion, as if nothing about it is personally relevant. How can he be so calm about it all when he could've been killed?

Wait, so *why* are we shut up in here when I saved everyone from that huge disaster?

"Because we were exposed as Mazoku." Conrad shrugs matter-of-factly. "The Cimarron territory is not a place where we Mazoku can take a pleasure trip."

"That's stupid!"

Do people as unreasonable as that really exist?!

It may have been just my petty bourgeois sense of justice, but I did save them. It had nothing to do with whether I'm Mazoku or Human, I did it to save everyone.

I guess I shouldn't have stuck my nose into it after all.

"...I'm sorry..."

"Whatever for?"

"For being so rash."

I slip down into a crouch with my arms around my knees and lean my forehead against Conrad's shoulder.

"If I managed to hold back the eruption, we would be digging into the main dish at dinner now."

Sitting with his legs thrust out, throat still exposed and defenseless, Wolfram says: "You have nothing to apologize for."

"Wolf..."

"It's the Humans who're stupid."

Out of the corners of my eyes I can see Conrad's perturbation in his slight tremor. His father was a Human, and Human blood runs through him as well. And however much people call me His Majesty the Maou, I'm still human.

Let's end this sort of talk right now and figure out what we're going to do rather than dwell on how this happened.

I gaze out at the tiny square-cut piece of violet sky with its pale lavender clouds.

"We have a vertically striped sunset today. It's such a bother that we can look at it from the window but not go out to it!"

"If you're the Maou, then change into something that can fly out of here."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not Batman, you know."

Well, even he doesn't change shape.

"Batman! I know that one. He's the one who dresses in black from head to toe and has a yellow butterfly drawn on his chest."

"...Wouldn't that make him Butterflyman?"

"Stop talking about things I don't know about!"

My stomach, now that I've woken from my long nap, moans like a turtledove. It's complaining about not having had anything to eat or drink for a day and a half.

"I guess an extravagant dinner is out of the question, but I won't be able to come up with any plans if I don't get any fuel for my brain."

"Ta-da!"

The door bursts open at the hearty Master Konbei-like shout. Wolfram, who was leaning against it, springs away. Standing there is a smiling man with loosely-tied orange hair, carefully holding a large silver tray with both hands.

"Thanks for waiting, here's your gourmet repast!"

The steam and mouth-watering scent from the tray fills the entire room.

At first I mistake him for one of the guards, and wonder at the personnel selection that produced such a jokester.

But he comes up right next to me and kneels to set the tray down beside me.

"You're awake, Your Majesty. I'm glad it was nothing serious. Here, this is a bit different from what the other guests are having, but I hope it will suit your taste..."

"Wh-wh-wh-why did you call me 'Your Majesty' just now?! I mean, I know everybody knows that I'm Mazoku now, but I'm just an ordinary Mazoku on a trip...well, actually, I'm physically human..."

Smiling like a prancing Roger Rabbit, he unbends his supple upper body and places both hands on my shoulders.

"Well, well! So the rumors are true! You really are a cutie!"

The corners of Conrad's mouth, though twisted rather interestingly, are relaxed. I don't sense any antagonism there.

"Hey, you're being rude towards His Majesty."

"I guess I am. But it only counts as rudeness inside the country—can't I at least have a little fun with a cold man who's forgotten all about me here on this distant ocean?"

"Forgotten? Does that mean I've met you somewhere before?"

His slightly slanted, almond-shaped eyes are smiling mischievously. But they are of a blue that somehow gives the impression of a capacity for complete ruthlessness with the simple flick of a switch.

"...I'm sorry, I'm not very good with faces..."

"It's not really a memorable face, is it?"

His husky voice, like something out of an old jazz record, sounds familiar. He has a thick, firm neck, and the superb muscles covering his shoulders and down his back are obvious even under his shirt—he has the perfect figure for an outfielder.

"Wait, you're Mi-Miss Biceps?!"

"Correct!"

"Huh? Wha? But you changed into a guy?!"

"Don't be silly, I was always a guy. The female dress is for my job, as my work dictates."

Now that I know he's a guy, the husky voice is rather charming. And that ideal outfielder's physique is understandable for a Mister Biceps.

"Then why was Conrad flirting with you?"

"The Commander? You mean why we're so close? Well, we *did* grow up together, after all."

Grow up together?! Wait, so does that mean another addition to the family? Gwen and Conrad and Wolf are brothers, so if he and Conrad share the same father...

"Oh no, we're not brothers."

The second son himself quickly refutes that conjecture.

"We were childhood friends, to put it simply. We're both half-Human, and we lived in the same place when we were children. When we grew up, we went into the same company, and we've survived life-or-death situations together as comrades-in-arms. His name is Grillet Josak. He's been guarding us since Schildkraut so he could come to our aid in case of an emergency."

"Nice to meet'cha."

The cheerful jokester bodyguard waves.

"He's a rude fellow, but I'll vouch for his skill—just ignore him during the trip."

"Actually, we've been naked together back in Shinma Kingdom even before boarding this ship."

"Naked...ah! Were you in the transsexual bath, then?! So you saw my...my..."

"Old son? Oh yeah, I had quite a nice view."

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

"What?! Yuuri, you had a kid behind my back?!"

"Don't be stupid!"

Josak's weapon is an axe.

I try singing the tune from a car commercial, but it doesn't erase the shock of seeing it.

"...Anyway, tuck into this before it gets cold. Your Majesty, will you be all right with ordinary fare? Or should we start with infirmary food?"

"No no, this is fine, I'll eat it, absolutely!" I assure him with fatuous greed. I'm great at overestimating my own stomach.

"Fantastic, that's how it should be. The galley head sneaked it out to me. He's a great admirer of your craftsmanship—he told me it was the first time he had seen such art created from stuff they usually toss out without a second thought."

"Huh, art? Conrad, did you make some stuff out of recycled goods or something?"

The gazes of both brothers are fixed on me.

"...I did?"

"Well, don't worry 'bout it."

Josak takes a cross-legged seat with a muffled laugh. There's no table, so we sit and eat from the tray on the floor in a circle, Asian-style.

Nobody reaches for the lamb ribs garnished with herb sauce.

I wonder why? It looks pretty good.

Josak returns before dawn and awakens us to make our escape.

We were sleeping huddled together, and I had a dream of my legs being entwined with those of a career woman and a high school girl. I don't want to think about what actually happened.

"We should be able to get to shore before this ship does even in a lifeboat rowing by hand. Since we're making our escape in the middle of the ocean, we'll try to drift as much as possible. Now, Your Majesty, Commander, get up. His Excellency looks like he's still deep in dreamland."

Pretty boys, like pretty girls, have low blood pressure. Wolfram rubs his eyes adorably and pulls the rough blanket close.

"Wolfram, you'll be late for school if you go back to sleep. You can nap in first period math class."

I get the feeling I'm not all here either.

"I could only recover about half of your luggage. Though I think I got all the important things."

"What about the ship? Didn't the pirates destroy all of the lifeboats?"

"Ah, let me set you straight on that point. That was their plan for deceiving the guards and slipping away."

Josak produces clothes for the three of us and pale yellow rubber balloons from his bag. He puts his mouth to one of them and blows.

"Stop staring and hurry up and change, then inflate this."

"What is it?"

"Water rescue practice doll. Mr. Livesaver."

So it's an expert on drowning?

"Put your clothes, huff, on these, huff, and we'll leave them behind, huff, when we go, huff, and they'll be disguised as you, huff. They don't know what to expect from Mazoku, so they'll keep these Mr. Livesavers imprisoned, hahah, makes me laugh just thinking about it."

"...Isn't it because of stuff like this that there're so many weird rumors about the Mazoku floating around?"

"Well, I guess so—but we need to buy ourselves time, Your Majesty."

That feels rather like self-justification to me.

We sneak quickly up to the ship's deck and climb into the lifeboat waiting for us. Sending us off with a thumbs-up, smirking and smoking a cigar, is the freckled Rick...or not. It's the sailor who hit him. Yes, so we know that he can be bought.

"He won't immediately turn around and sound the alarm, will he?"

Gripping his slanted oar, Conrad looks back at the luxury liner fading away in the distance.

"There are two kinds of people who allow themselves to be bought. One will betray you for small change, while the other will not betray you except for a large amount of money. Money is his weakness, but once bought he will stay bought."

"I see. Then what about the ones who accept a lot of money and then turn on you?"

"At that point it's no longer about money, but about advantage. Don't you think?"

"Both of you, stop chatting and keep rowing! If they catch up with us it'll all be for nothing!"

The boat starts listing slightly. Wolfram is starting to doze off next to me.

"Wah, Wolf, don't fall asleep! We're turning, we're going to start going around in circles—!"

"Hrmm."

"Not hrmm! Row! Row, come on! Pull-and-push, pull-and-push, heeheefuu, heeheefuu."

"...Your Majesty, isn't that the Lamaze Technique...?"

How the heck does he know that? Mr. Conrad coming up with the name before me.

Four fugitives desperately row for the wavering lights of the island as dawn silvers the ocean.

Good-bye, my first and last voyage on an extravagant luxury liner. I don't really have any regrets.

Drops of spray from the oars drip from my cheeks, and the salt lingers on my tongue when I lick it away.

Van der Veer is still silent and motionless. It'll probably be crowded and bustling once the festival starts.

Shinma Kingdom's treasure is sleeping on this island. The wickedest, evilest...no, I shouldn't judge without any first-hand information. The mightiest ultimate weapon, which cannot be wielded by any except the Maou. I'm going to fetch it.

I didn't come here to get attacked by pirates.

"All right! Just you wait, Demon Sword Melgib!"

"Morgif," I'm immediately corrected.

A glance at the tiny ship in the distance tells me that we're close to shore.

For some reason, I start singing Mr. Michael's song to myself in Japanese. Conrad joins in with a smattering of English, and we sing together:

"Hallelujah."

It must be a rare Maou who sings praises to God, even if unintentionally.

Chapter 7

If you fall in love with an island girl
Van der Volcano will erupt.
Even if she can't cross the ocean with you,
Look up and you'll see the same moon in the sky.
Oh this, this is the dream isle Van Van Van der Veer
Come just once and you'll never forget it (keep beat with clapping)

That's the Van der Veer Marching Song, #1.

Though I'm not so sure about the whole dream isle thing. I mean, it looks kinda like one of those places built on top of a reclaimed landfill.

"This is NOTHING like a dream isle!"

Panting for air, leaden feet.

But the endless mountain trail continues ever upward, and no amount of grumbling or yelling is going to change that.

We landed around four-thirty or so, four mermen dripping with sweat and seawater and unknown varieties of seaweed, at a sandy beach unattached to any dock or marina. Since we looked pretty strange, we cleaned up at an unused beach hut and immediately tackled the mountain after a short nap.

We made a fine start, misled by Conrad's story of a paved road and claims that even children can make the summit effortlessly.

"Any kid who can climb this effortlessly must be in the world-class wunderchildren league."

"How do you mean? A hill road like this won't even make the grade for mountain-climbing training."

Yeah, and first-year senior high students aren't usually trained in mountain-climbing.

"We'll have plenty of time if we can scale it before noon."

"But I'm an invalid! I mean, I puked up everything in my stomach earlier! Isn't this a bit harsh?"

"That was because Your Majesty was greedy and gorged yourself on a full-course meal."

I had stomach cramps from stuffing all that food into a stomach that's been empty for close to two days. So my dummy double is now keeping company with a puddle of my body's violent rejection of my excesses in the low-class confinement room of that luxury liner.

The sun high overhead scorches my hair, and the back of my head twinges in the heat. Calling the stone paving beneath the soles of my shoes 'flat' would be stretching the term pretty far.

"I don't believe it, geez. Feels like the time I had to walk Hakone's old highway. That was unbelievably steep, too—I was almost sure it was an animal trail."

Except that the road here on this tropical dream isle winds through a forest of broad-leafed trees.

Van der Veer is a volcanic island around a hundred kilometers in diameter, blessed with many hot springs and a sea rich in seafood. Its economy is based on tourism. From the islands I remember from my atlas, I'd say it's about the size of Eromanga in the Republic of Vanuatu—I have no idea if a hundred kilometers is big or small for an island. In any case, it's perfect for a resort.

Josak, who has pulled ahead and is climbing alone in the lead, turns and waves exaggeratedly.

"There's a rest area just up ahead!"

"How far is 'just up ahead'?!"

When not in female clothing Josak is truly strong—he really does have the ideal outfielder physique. His agility and quickness would confine any hit to a single. Though he's probably strong even when he's working undercover. It was a wise move on my part to not attempt to dance with him.

After an unpleasantly long way to get 'just up ahead,' the rest stop appears.

"...A tea...a teahouse...?"

It's open.

The teahouse, which features a copious amount of red carpeting, looks just like the teahouses in historical dramas where the emperors and shoguns always stop to drink tea and eat sweet dumplings.

I plop down in exhaustion and order without even looking at the menu.

"Madam, tea and sweet dumplings."

"Hmm?"

The mistress of the house is a beauty with gold hair and blue eyes. She's brought cookies

and red tea.

"...That's not how it's..."

Conrad and Josak nonchalantly raise the white porcelain teacups to their lips, but Wolfram and I are both shaking right down to our fingertips and don't even have the energy left to slurp our drinks.

Still holding her tray, the beautiful proprietress looks at the group of us, two full of energy and two wilted and drooping, with keen interest. Since I was the first to speak to her, she directs her inquiry at me.

"You probably already know this, but the portable shrine for the festival will set out from the next mountain over, not this one."

"Huh?! So this place doesn't have anything to do with the festival?"

"That mountain is the dormant volcano. This one has four or five hot spring hotels, but that's about it."

There's another rustic-looking building a few dozen meters from this one, further in.

"Did we come to the wrong place, then?! I don't think I'm up to the challenge of going back down..."

Wolfram has his teacup in a two-handed grip and is sitting motionless, eyes staring.

"...And it looks like he's already off to another world."

"This isn't the wrong place. Our business is not with the temple on the neighboring mountain."

"Then we're not going to that Pantheon-like temple on the pamphlet the sightseeing society was handing out?"

"Did you want to see it? I'm sorry."

Conrad sets his cup back on the saucer. Josak nods in support of his childhood friend and sinks his teeth into a charred-looking cookie, devoting himself to the task of replenishing his calories.

"I didn't think you'd be interested in a blazing portable shrine being rushed down the dormant volcano. What we're looking for is at the summit of this mountain, not the 'soul-stirring Fire Festival.'"

Blazing portable shrine...now I kinda want to see it.

"Oh, but you can't mean to go up to the top of the mountain!"

The proprietress pales.

"The spring at the top has been shut down, and there's nothing else to see up there! Well, I guess there's still a fish pond, but..."

"Shut down? Since when? Did something happen?"

She darts a glance at Conrad, having apparently decided that he's my guardian.

"One summer night about fifteen, sixteen years ago, a red light fell from the sky into the pond, see, and the spring boiled for three days and three nights."

"Was it a meteorite?!"

The woman shakes her head hard, and lowers her voice in a vain attempt to sound more dramatic.

"...It was a demon!"

"Demon?"

"Yes. Since then nobody's been able to go into that spring. If they do, it's like they're struck by lightning and their entire body goes numb. In the worst cases people's hearts have stopped or they've gotten horribly burned. There's just one person who actually managed to go into the deep part of the spring without touching the hot water, and he saw a demon. It was silver and glittering and when he tried to grab it he fainted dead away.

Silver and glittering, and if you grab it it'll make you faint?!

"He was all but dead when he was discovered, and even now he just keeps mumbling things that make no sense. The burn on his head healed a long time ago, but he keeps yelling 'the face! the face!'"

That's several times scarier than Inagawa Junji's stories. But my brain's ticking away, and it's come up with a theory: that it's not a demon, but a demon sword. Which means that once we complete the demon sword: get! operation and take it back home, they can reopen the spring too.

It'll make Shinma Kingdom strong enough that we won't have to be worried about other countries invading us anymore. As a bonus, it'll raise my standing as the king, so it's a win all around.

"Put your mind at rest, Ma'am. We are on a journey to exorcise that demon. Once we do, visitors will be able to enjoy the spring in peace and quiet again."

"...If you can actually manage to lay your hands on the sleeping silver."

"Josa!"

"But it's true. Dozens of people have already been injured, haven't they? I can't guarantee that the young lord here's gonna come out of it unscathed," the Guard of the Inner Circle warns direly, and cackles like the Disney bunny at his own ill-portented words. "Well, don't worry 'bout it too much. If that happens we'll just tie you to the boat and drag you back home after us."

"Josa! Your rudeness is going too far!"

I immediately start clapping.

That's right, a boat's the answer!

Fortunately, several squid boats with white peeling paint have been left at the fish pond at the summit.

"...Well, all we need is something that won't send us to the bottom of the lake."

"That's right! So what if it's a bit old? It's still a lot better than a mud boat."

"Scoop, anybody see a scoop anywhere? Something to bail out the water if it leaks?!"

Man, this Guard of the Inner Circle, he was at least quieter when dressed as a woman. Though he can play both Ogin and Tobizaru—that's pretty convenient.

A gigantic fish breaks the muddy surface of the pond. Now that it can lead a carefree existence with its archenemy gone, it seems to have evolved from a carp into a tuna.

We climb over the crude barricade to stand on the bank of the spring at the summit. The wall at the entrance holds countless scribbles. The red and yellow lines are completely meaningless to me.

"What does all this writing mean?"

Josak reads in a monotone: "We were here hey hey hey, we are daredevils, yay."

"Dares, huh?"

The entrance continues right into a cave where rock teeth jut from both the walls and the ceiling. It's spacious and high enough that I don't feel any claustrophobia, but still exceptionally creepy because the light from outside can't reach within. We shine our torches around the cave.

Dense steam from the heated water covers everything.

"Commonly known as a large-scale cave-bath, like a hot spring theme park..."

"Ow."

Conrad presses against the back of his hand where he was splashed by hot water from the oars.

"Is it really that hot? This isn't a boiling water bath, is it?!"

"Your Majesty, be careful...!"

I stick a finger over the side into the water. It's pretty moderate, a nice temperature for a bath.

"It's not that hot."

"Are you all right?"

I've always been the impatient type, so I like my baths hot.

"Nothing to...oh, ouch!"

I suddenly feel a sharp pain and numbness run simultaneously down my thigh, like it's been stabbed by a centipede. I think a few drops fell from my finger while I was shaking the water off.

"Uwah, ouch! That's hot, hot hot hot! That really feels like a shock! Like, like a jellyfish stung me—or no, a Portuguese man-of-war! Definitely a Portuguese man-of-war! But why was my hand okay? Why wasn't it hot when I touched it with my bare hand?"

Why was my hand fine when my thigh was a total disaster even though it's protected by my pants?

"My hand is going numb too. See? It's swelling."

"Yeah, I see it! I wonder if that means this spring's acidic?"

Though a slight acidity in the water is good for the skin. I can't really come up with a good explanation.

I take my shoes and socks off and stick my big toe in experimentally.

"...It's fine..."

"This is a problem."

"Why?"

I try dipping both feet in. I don't feel anything other than the warmth of the water.

"We came after receiving the news that the demon sword Morgif is here at the summit of this mountain. The local stories also seem to indicate that the demon of the spring is Morgif. So I'm afraid the special transformation of the hot water is its doing."

"Huh, so it can do stuff like that? That's very demon sword-like."

"This is no time for admiration. Remember the claim that only His Majesty the Maou can carry Morgif? That's why you're not harmed when you touch the water. But Your Majesty's clothes are not a part of you, so they are not subject to the same immunity to attack. That's why they burned."

"I'm getting a bad feeling here."

Josak rows along carefully, holding the torch in his left hand high.

"I can see the silver glittering!"

The hot spring demon that's been terrifying the locals is leaning submerged against the innermost wall of the cave. It sparkles in the reflected light—more of a flash than a glitter.

My trusty baseball buddy starts off with an apology and says: "Please take off your clothes."

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

"No, I mean, you will need to do so if you are to enter the hot water. The boat cannot go any further, and if you go into the water with your clothes on, they will actually harm you."

"Oh, th-that's what you meant."

I thought we were going to do sumo again, like that time I wrestled Wolf.

"Okay, okay, so I just need to walk over there and grab Melgib, right?"

"Be careful. Watch your step and don't slip."

Aaaaall right then, a man's gotta be decisive. I mean, come on, I *did* travel through the public bath to get here this time. It's way better than toilet water all around, whether you're looking at it or hearing about it, not to mention being washed away with it. And besides, this is the hot spring of a dormant volcano island, certifiably good for the health.

I turn my back to the two of them and gingerly stick my foot in. The boat is stuck on a shallow spot where the water only comes up to my knees, but the bottom drops off sharply after that.

"Are you all right? Do you feel any numbness?"

"It's nice and hot. Special care required if you have high blood pressure."

Conrad smiles wryly and says in his usual warm, good-humored voice, "Are you planning to soak for a bit, then?"

"I will after I finish this job."

Near the sunken object in question, the water rises to about the level of my stomach. It's now a pool rather than a bath. I bend my knees and sloooowly stretch out a hand, and just as the tips of my fingers might have grazed against metal—

"Gyah!"

"What's wrong?!"

It was probably just my imagination. I timidly reach out once more, trying not to look at the thing. But—

"Yeeargh! It bit me! It bit me! It felt like a fish mouth biting my finger—it definitely bit me!"

I leap back and peer into the water. Focusing, waiting for the waves to calm, my eyes catch sight of the silver glinting...sword...

"Gyah, face! The face, the faaaaace!"



So that's why!

That's why the young man who looked directly at the demon is yelling 'the face! the face!'

The thing sitting there is a sword with a face.

Even if I spend all my time on baseball, I have played a few video games too. Stuff like Power Pro and Let's Create Our Own Pro Baseball Team, not to mention the Soccer version that Murata had me try. And of course I've played Dragon Quest and FF, the big RPG titles, like everybody else. So I've seen quite a few swords with faces, the special weapons that raise character abilities to their max levels. A lot of them have weird carvings, like hilts decorated to look like demons' faces. And I've fought vampires with them too, though this was before I became Maou. Aaah, that was on the old PS.

But this thing!

"I wasn't told about this! Nobody told me that the sword is this dangerous! This thing's cursed for sure! And anybody who touches it will be cursed too!"

This sword's face is at the base of the blade rather than the hilt, and it's so realistic that it doesn't look carved. It's not like one of those rough, grim demons or monsters you see so often, either. It's eerie and unpleasant and somehow miserable-looking, as sinister and baleful as Munch's scream.

"No way am I touching that, it's like the bad guy from the Scream! It's even got tilted eyebrows!"

I'm about to starting crying here.

"Hold on, Your Majesty, calm down."

"But it bit me, it bit my index finger! 'Cause it's got a mug that looks like one of those face-shaped smears you see on walls! Aaagh, now I'm totally cursed, I'll never be able to fall in love or get married! I can't touch something like that, I'm not the kind of hero that can carry something like that!"

"All right, Yuuri, it's okay if you can't, we'll think of something else. Calm down, walk slowly back to the boat.

I grip the stone at my chest and force myself to take several calming breaths, swallow.

Josak gestures like he's singing. "Come back, Your Majesty, you don't have to put yourself in danger. Hurry back, the little foot soldiers'll cross the scary bridge for you."

My teeth are clenched so tightly that my throat feels constricted. I can't swallow the ugly emotions I'm trying to force back, and they scorch my chest.

"...Are you saying that I'm being irresponsible?"

"Yuuri, it's okay, leave it."

"Are you calling me irresponsible?!"

Seated on the edge of the tiny craft, Josak sweeps his orange hair up and lets it fall. Though this man is now a part of my guard, a smile particular to intelligent animals surfaces on his face.

A beast's smile: clever and strong, yet devoid of kindness.

"I'm not saying anything of the sort, Your Majesty. Please hurry back. Let's say good-bye to this place as soon as we can."

"...What do you know?"

"Yuuri, over here..."

"What the hell do you know?!"

I always think I'm being childish. And I always tell myself to be more adult. If I could have parried with a smile, my life until now would have been so much easier.

The lions-blue stone is the same temperature as my skin. Gripping it, I spit my words down at the water as if my enemy were inside.

"I'm just an ordinary senior high student, and I've lived an ordinary life for fifteen years. Then I'm summoned to this dream world and I'm suddenly forced to become the Maou! This demon sword, it's like a ghost or a phantom, and I never knew something like that could exist! So now I'm going to be criticized and scorned for being afraid?! Anyone would be scared half to death if they saw something like that! If this sword is so powerful, why don't you try giving it to a hero or champion or something? None of them would use something that disgusting! So why do I have to be the one?!"

The stone pulses like a living heart. Though of course that's impossible.

"I've never seen a sword except at the museum, and now you want me to carry this?! You have no idea how I feel!"

Conrad holds out his hand to me pleadingly. The other man shrugs.

"No, I don't got any idea. How Your Majesty spent your childhood, what kind of a person you are—I don't know about any of that. I have no idea what your feelings are or what you're thinking. Our lot is to obey without complaint, no matter what kind of a person becomes Maou. The soldiers and people and children, we can only believe in our king and obey."

Conrad's going to plunge in after me if I delay any longer. Staring down at my toes, I walk slowly back to the boat.

Until we reach the inn where we left Wolfram, no one says a word.

"Why didn't you come back with it?"

—is the first thing out of Wolfram's mouth after an entire afternoon spent resting. He's even taken a room at the hot spring inn. Frankly, because I am a wimp. A total wimp. I have no energy left to defend myself.

"...It's just out of my grasp."

Spending the night here would probably be a lot more relaxing than returning to the city, crammed as it is with tourists. Conrad and Josak go out to bespeak another twin room. When we set out from Shinma Kingdom, the plans were to stay at the highest-class hotel in Van der Veer.

If we hadn't encountered those pirates on the way, I would still have been in the midst of my wild merrymaking as Young Master Mitsuemmon.

Seated on his bed's wooden frame, Wolfram leans back against the log-cabin walls. He's holding Günter's diary.

"What was it like? How long and wide was the blade? Was it shining with sublime grace and manliness?"

The image of Morgif flashes across the back of my head.

"...Just the opposite."

"Opposite? But it's the mightiest sword in the world, and it only obeys the Maou! Here, read this, Günter wrote about it here."

"No thanks. I can't read anyway."

"Oh, that's right. Hurry up and remember, then. It's so inconvenient."

I tumble into the bed parallel to his, lying on it spread-eagled and staring up at the ceiling.

"You know, I was thinking that since it's a king's sword, it would have a hilt with gaudy gold ornamentation or fine platinum craftsmanship, a guard with fretwork that could move an artisan to tears, stuff like that. And the haft-end would have a gemstone inserted—like a typical king's sword."

It would be a famous sword with the sharpest blade, something that you can use on anything from cutting up squid noodles to slicing puffer fish.

"But actually? It had a face that...a face that scares me just thinking about it, and even though I'm supposed to carry it and become its master, it b-b-bit my finger!"

"It bit you? That's odd. The Demon Sword Morgif is supposed to be absolutely obedient to the Maou...maybe it was hungry?"

"Hungry?! It's metal!"

Not that that's any weirder than a metal sword having a mouth, I guess.

"Okay, listen. Since Morgif has the power to absorb human life, it needs a supply of energy to be invoked. It's hard to say from the official records, but some history books claim that it likes young women...Günter made a detailed investigation."

"Does that mean that it k...kills people?! Wouldn't that make Melgib a vampire sword?"

"Weren't you listening when he explained at the castle? It doesn't always kill, necessarily, but...what are you panicking about, Yuuri? You're not thinking of yourself as a Human again, are you? You know what kind of people they are. Even though we saved their lives, they locked us up because we're Mazoku. Aagh, just thinking about it makes me angry."

"...I have nothing to say to such ingratitude."

The constant soul-searching a citizen of Japan is raised with is preposterous in the Twenty-Seventh Maou.

Thud! Wolfram shuts the mountain goat hide-bound diary.

"Anyway, returning without Morgif is out of the question."

"Right."

"I'll go with you tomorrow."

"Huh?"

He can't give me any real help even if he comes with me. Even Conrad, who could make short work of any sword master, couldn't move a finger to help me. But Wolfram is indifferent to my private waffling. He folds his arms and says rather happily, "Since you're a total wimp."

"Stop calling me a wimp!"

Ah.

The selfish prince with the angelic features and clear emerald eyes that remind you of the bottom of a lake. Abbreviate half-ironically, and you get selfish Pooh.

Wolfram always goes right to the point. He throws himself straight into any challenge.

He bores into both my mitt and my chest, but it's kinder and gentler than a lie.

"What? What are you grinning about?"

"...I was just thinking, it's been a while."

"What has?"

"You calling me a wimp."

"That's because you left the country. You left your people and your land to the care of others. You have no sense or consciousness of being a king. What's wrong with calling a wimp a wimp?"

"Nothing."

That's right, I'm just a wimp anyway, so it's not like I'm going to give up after making just one mistake.

The stain on the ceiling boards looks kinda like Melgib—it's actually a bit cute.

"That's true, huh. A new Prior Maou like me—I was never perfect anyway. The first time I went up to the batter's box in my first match, I took three good strikes—you never know how to attack a problem when you don't know anything about its character and type."

In the end, I got an infield hit.

But that's it.

"Wolf."

"What?"

I kick up my feet vigorously and use the reverse swing to leverage myself from the mattress.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"I have no idea what for, but come with me anyway."

By the time I think 'oh damn,' it's already too late. I've already managed to step on the angel's detonator. A flush stains his white cheeks, and he goes off in his nerve-grating alto:

"How could you say that so flippantly? Why did I have to come with you on this horrendous journey anyway?—have you really, seriously thought about it at all? Because you proposed to me! Now I have to keep an eye on you so nothing happens to you on your

journey! So you don't get involved with the wrong set or end up being burdened with feelings that you can't requite!"

"Huh? Oh, oh right! Yeah, that's right, I forgot, it just never even crossed my mind! So we haven't settled that one yet, huh?"

"You forgot—?!"

I instinctively cover my head with both arms.

"Okay, then why don't I dump you? 'I'm sorry, let's call it quits?'"

"Don't you dare! It would be a blow to my self-respect!"

"Oh, oh riiight, then why don't you reject me? 'I refuse your proposal.' I think my pride would be able to handle it just fine. I was the one in the wrong, so no help for it."

"I can't do that!"

"Why not? Is there some kind of rule about that? Some sort of religious reason?"

"Shut up!"

Wolfram stands straight up and opens the corner door without another word.

"Aaah, Wolf! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I was wrong! I'm apologizing, so don't lock yourself up in the closet!"

"Shut up, you skank!!"

Didn't that mean someone with light footwork?!

After a carbohydrates-oriented meal, the beautiful proprietress tells us about the festival.

You can get a great view of the flaming portable shrine being dashed down the next mountain from this inn, but it's believed to bring bad luck to see it from the side, so she cannot recommend it. The grand finale is at the arena near the harbor tomorrow evening, and we'll certainly regret it if we miss it. They had a large number of participants entered just before the event this year, so the spectacle will probably be an unusually large one.

C'est excitant!

Wolfram, who has no interest in human festivals, goes to bed immediately after finishing his wine.

I feel like getting drunk and airing all my grievances too, but I'm not going to smoke or drink as long as there's still any possibility that I haven't reached my full height yet. Instead, I lie in bed tracking the moon's course.

I get up in the middle of the night because I'm parched, but there's no water left in the pitcher. I open the closet door to get my coat and fetch some water.

"...Of course I wouldn't..." I hear through the thin wall separating us from the neighboring room.

"In the end my loyalty is to the kingdom. I will obey His Majesty's commands, however unreasonable. You of all people should know that. I just wanted to know our new king a little bit more, about what sort of a person he is."

"So you were testing him."

That's Conrad. There's the sound of a glass being set down on the table.

"Don't make it sound like it was such a big deal. I just want to be prepared, s'all. If this new lordling is gonna be like the last Maou, we soldiers need to resign ourselves. Resign ourselves to going to our deaths without a word, that is. Don't misunderstand me. I don't hate Lady Cäli, not at all—on the contrary, I love her more dearly than my own parents. But she was wrong. She didn't try to look at it all with her own eyes. That's why I want to know what the next era is going to be like, to be steeled for it."

"That's why I said—"

"It's true for you too, isn't it? How many of your soldiers did you lose? How many of your friends snatched away? If Lady Cäli had made her own decisions instead of leaving everything to Stoffel, maybe even Julia would still be..."

"Josak!"

Conrad, who rarely even raises his voice, slaps the table with obvious irritation.

"...From this point forward, if you say or do anything to mislead His Majesty, I will relieve you of your duties."

"Sorry, Lord Weller, Your Excellency does not have that authority. If you want to give me orders, then you'd better get your command back, 'cause you're hardly gonna spend the rest of your life babysitting His Majesty the new Maou, are you?"

"With His Majesty's permission, that is exactly what I intend to do."

"You've gotta be joking! Why would you give yourself up to that?! Are you sure you're not just deluded by his cuteness?! Don't tell me the man once called the Lion of Ruttenberg has lost his fangs..."

Conrad cuts Josak off with that eloquent smile I can see so clearly.

"Now you're dredging up the long-dead past."

"Stop being so humble. Oh yeah, you gave that to the lordling, huh? If young general Grantz saw it, it'd set his gray matter a-boiling."

I move softly away from the wall, pick up my coat and close the closet door.

Wolfram's quiet breathing is typical pretty-boy, but his eyes twitch, and their whites show from beneath his eyelids. He must be right in the middle of a dream. Taking great care to not wake him, I leave the room and steal a lamp from the front counter. I can see the

illuminated Parthenon temple clearly from the mountain path. It's red and swaying and quite beautiful.

Voices swell into a roar, and the blazing shrine begins its downward dash with a train of torches following behind. The annual ceremony seeks to calm the God's fury and hold back further volcanic activity by reproducing the eruption that occurred two hundred years ago. Up until a hundred years ago they would offer up innocent girls, and countless lives were sacrificed that way.

All is noise and tumult on the next mountain, but I stand alone at the summit of this one. Let's get dressed up for the cave bathhouse in the middle of the night.

Only the graffiti welcomes me.

We were here, hey hey hey. I'm here too, and this is my second time. I'm all alone this time. Someone should compliment me, yay.

"...So what does 'Lion of Ruttenberg' mean, anyway?"

Someone like that believes in me.

I'm just a wimp of a king, but one that wants to evolve and come just a bit closer to being the right sort of man.

The spring's pungent water is as pleasant as it was this afternoon. I know where Morgif is. I set my steps down firmly and head towards him in the hip-deep warm water.

"Yo, Demon Sword."

The blade glows in the water.

All of a sudden my bravado fades, and my timid self reasserts itself. I'm strong of will but faint of heart.

"Hey, Melgib, I mean Morgif. This isn't 'hello,' 'cause we met each other this afternoon, do you remember? I'm Yuuri."

I'm Toraemon, I am Rika-chan. First-person self-introduction.

"I wanna...no, I came here to give you an invitation. You've been submerged here for fifteen years now, haven't you? If you came here for your health, you must be completely healed by now. No matter how much you like hot springs, your body will bloat and dissolve away if you're in here for that long. So isn't it about time you got out? There are lots of fun things to do outside, too, you know? I'd be happy to give you a hand if you lack the determination to get out by yourself, so don't bite me, okay? Promise?"

Bending, I timidly reach out my hand.

"Gyah!"

I involuntarily drop the lamp. The light disappears, and the place plunges into darkness. But I concentrate on my breathing, and after a little while the moonlight slanting in from the entrance softly illuminates the inside of the cave.

"...Why do you keep biting me? You're a sword! Ordinary swords don't have faces, you know?! And even when they do they're not alive, so they don't bite!"

The answer comes to me in a flash.

It's not ordinary. It is, after all, a demon sword. Of course it's not ordinary. Why does it bite? Because it has a mouth, because it's alive. It's alive.

I'm not picking up an object that shouldn't bite, I'm trying to catch something that's alive and most certainly bites. Yes, like a puppy with a biting quirk...though there is a world of difference in cuteness. Not that this has anything to do with anything, but how many times have I used the word 'bite?'

Aaaall right then, data and courage assemblage complete. This is our second match. Not knowing how to take the lead doesn't cut it anymore. I call a general mobilization of my memory to evoke what I felt in that moment.

The fragment of courage when I caught a pro ball for the first time in my life.

"If you're alive, you should have just said so right from the start. I'm not thinking of you as a sword anymore, dammit! You're a dog! Or if not a dog, then a negroshinoyamakishy!"

Yelling as the ball approaches slowly, rotating, straight-on. Shibuya, accuracy is important in catching. Always receive the ball straight-on. Morgif's hilt is propped up right in front of me. I position my hands, half-bent. Oh wait, you're supposed to pick up heavy objects from a squatting position. Your career as an athlete is over if you hurt your back.

I submerge myself up to my face and peer at the warped and swaying Morgif through the refraction of the warm water. He looks like Souseki on a bent note. I laugh.

"Koff! Ofay, Moogiff wibbe, leff go!"

Spring water flows into my nose and mouth. I grip the hilt, slender in proportion to the blade, and thrust myself upward with my knees. Morgif struggles for a moment, but finally slides out of the water and shows himself before me.

There's the sound of a blade cutting through the wind as he touches air for the first time in fifteen years.

"Aaah."

"...Aaah?"

"Wooooo."

"...Hey com'on...you're not the wind..."

"Haaaaao."

Can he be singing?! This thing?!

"We-well, I guess whatever's alive sings. Like puppies barking and kittens purring."

Oh yeah, and kittens are supposed to go 'meh meh.'

But what kind of a sword is this, anyway? He has a face instead of jewels or carvings, and moans and groans to assert himself. But my grip on the hilt is comfortable, and he fits my hand exactly. Like holding a familiar bat.

I walk back past the graffiti so I don't have to keep listening to the demon sword's groans. Man, I'm a daredevil, too.

When I step out into the moonlit night, Conrad is waiting for me with his hands on his hips.

I can't see his face with the moon behind him.

"I know you're grinning."

"How did you know that?"

"I know exactly what expression you're wearing even when I can't see you."

See? I was spot-on.

He spreads his arms wide in welcome and wraps me in a bath towel.

"So you did it."

"I did it! How about it? The king's sword."

"Brilliant."

"Brilliant? But look at him, this weird face. And he talks, too! Oh, and he's got a mole in the same place as the Buddha."

He's not golden and shining or encrusted with jewels or made of any special alloy, but he's got a tiny black stone the size of a small soybean right in the middle of his forehead.

"Hmmpf, I don't think he's brilliant at all."

"I didn't mean Morgif. I meant you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Yuuri."

He keeps saying these things that set my teeth on edge with such frankness. I have to practice swinging the demon sword a few times to hide my blush. Left foot pulled up, pendulum batting form. The bat, rather than whistling through the air, makes a jarring, displeased moan.

"...Maybe this will make my approval rating go up a little."

"Approval rating?" My acting batting coach lifts his chin slightly in inquiry as he stands watching over my swings. Was that an unexpected choice of words?

"Yeah, my approval rating as a king. 'Cause it must be at rock bottom right now, right? None of my people care about me, and even the former prince and my Guard of the Inner Circle hate me."

"Josak is loyal to his duties, but feels no appreciation for Your Majesty. And as for Gwendal..."

Though no one's around, he lowers his voice.

"Gwendal doesn't hate you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he loves small cute things."

What?!

"Like kittens or squirrels or those hamsters you see so often on Earth."

"Eeeh?!"

The towel falls from my hips and gently flutters to the ground. If Günter were here his nose would be bleeding again.

Chapter 8

Once again an odor of hitherto-unknown offensiveness fills the kitchen, and the soldiers have come crying to Lord von Voltaire.

Spitting a curse on the name of the man who is the root of all evil, he stomps down corridors of stone floors to the kitchen.

"Günt...guh...hack...oog...!"

Scarlet smoke billows endlessly towards the ceiling. Gwendal hunches over with a hand against his face, tears streaming unstoppably from his eyes.

"Curse you, wh-what are you doing?!"

Pain prickles his nose and throat with every breath. His words are interjected with coughs.

"Günter! What, hack, are you doing hack cough?!"

"Gwendal, is that yooooou?"

Who else would it be?! The brazen perpetrator of the poison gas himself is standing right in the middle of the gushing smoke wearing a mask and glasses.

"Wh, what is this horrible gas?"

"Since you have forbidden me from throwing small animals into boiling oil, I have substituted plants. Look here, does this gigantic red pepper not remind you of a baby

mouse when you examine it up close?"

"You're dropping red peppers in oil?"

"Yes."

"A whole lot of red peppers?"

"Exactly!"

And thus the invention of Shinma Kingdom's red chile oil.

Seizing Günter's arm, Gwendal manages to drag him out of the kitchen. He can't seem to stop crying yet.

"Stop this fortune-telling."

"Why? Do you not wish to pray for His Majesty's safe return?!"

"I'm not saying that. I certainly would like him to return safely—it would be quite a bother if he were to die in a foreign land."

"Die?!...how can you say such dreadful things! You demon, ogre, cold-hearted beast!"

"Call me a demon all you want."

They are both part of the Demon Tribe, after all.

Günter's beauty is so extreme that women keep their distance from him, and thus actually robs him of the title of most lusted-after man. Still, he has at least retained the crown of Shinma Kingdom's first beauty for almost fifty years running. It must be stated, therefore, that the new king's powers are not to be underestimated if they are capable of putting such a ghastly expression on his face. Though Yuuri's arrival has probably prompted a shift in the kingdom rankings.

"Or could it be that..." Fear flashes across the face worn beyond all recognition. "...you feign apathy in order to conceal your wicked thoughts towards His Majesty's person?!"

"*You're* the one with wicked thoughts towards his person."

"Aaargh, how completely vexing! Just as I thought!"

What is just as he thought?!

Gwendal's eyes swim with bemusement on the level of being caught between Osugi and P-ko. Fashion check, please.

"I had my suspicions, vague as they were. After all, His Majesty is endowed with such wisdom, such beauty—even the noble black in his own person! He is possessed of a strong sense of justice, compassion for his people, and both timidity and fierceness; he touches everything with fresh wonder—in ages past the Shinou's favor would surely have...Gwendal!"

Günter grabs Lord von Voltaire's collar before he is able to sneak away.

"Ah, but of course! If one should peruse the histories of your past love affairs, one would know that you brothers have ever only fallen in love with the strong-willed."

"Stop perusing a thing like that!"

That's no ordinary gleam in Günter's eyes. One can almost hear background music behind him.

"...First Wolfram...now you..."

"What an absurd and odious misunderstanding."

"How could it be a misunderstanding? Aaaah! Everyone has fallen madly in love with His Majesty—he'll be emasculated!"

"Someone! Someone, I need a hand here! He's gone mad, Lord von Kleist has gone mad!"

He has no choice but to call for help.

'Help!' comes the cry from the western ward, and we dash over to check a patient's pulse; a scream of 'No, don't die!' draws us at a panting gallop to the eastern medical building to make sure the patient there is still breathing.

We're running madly around Van der Veer's General Hospital with the lackluster Morgif in hand in the sacrilegious anticipation of one of the seriously-ill patients dying and providing the demon sword with a human life.

"Wh-why does this hospital have such a high survival rate? It's bizarre! I mean, it's great for the patients' families! It's wonderful, but..."

I can't bring myself to actually hasten their deaths, and not a single person has died since we arrived this morning. This is a three-star hospital. A little earlier, as Wolfram was checking the pulse of an unconscious patient, the old man abruptly grabbed Wolfram's hand, opened his eyes and called a woman's name. His daughter and grandchild were overjoyed, and cried and babbled four years' worth of tears and chatter with grandpa.

The damage was all Wolfram's. He clutched his wrists and muttered something with cold sweat on his brows. It sounded like a charm against evil. Though a Mazoku saying a charm against evil feels kinda weird.

We're stuck on the hospital race course because Morgif needs to replenish his energy. Shortly after I plucked him out of the hot spring, he lost both his glow and his firmness, sighed a weak 'Hao...' and hasn't said a single thing since.

Not that swords are ordinarily supposed to say anything anyway, but for him it's peculiar. Even his surface seems to have dried out somehow, and he's as wilted as a woman in the middle of a diet.

That hot spring must have had an anti-rusting effect.

"So it's really like Günter wrote in his diary—it can't be used as a demon sword unless it absorbs a human life?!"

"A life...that's easy for you to say, but...how? It's not like you can go and buy something like that at the convenience store!"

"If you're looking for quantity, the quickest way is probably putting a village to the torch. Or slaughtering a family, but that's a bit less effective."

"Josak, His Majesty would never do something so terrible. Though I suppose in the old days Japanese samurai would attack people under cover of darkness to test their new swords, so..."

"Augh! Geez, you guys! Do you have any morals left?! I could never take the life of an innocent person! *Nobody* should."

So the whole party proceeded to the hospital in the morning and ended up dashing frantically about until noon.

But even though we've run ourselves to the ground, nobody has set off on their last journey yet—in fact, no less than three people revived. We've had gratitude heaped on us, and people have even started calling Wolfram the Angel of Love. But for us it's something of a mixed blessing.

"...Looks like this strategy is pretty hopeless."

Drooping with exhaustion, I lay my cheek on the table as we're having lunch at the hospital dining room.

There are few people around—which is no surprise, since this is the last day of the Fire Festival and everyone is preparing for the grand finale this evening. The locals are busy with commerce, the tourists are busy sight-seeing. So pretty much only the patients and their family and friends and the hospital staff are stuck fretting in the hospital.

Since Morgif didn't come with a scabbard, he's been tightly wrapped in cloth and looks like the pitiful *Mummy* edition of himself. Which of course means I can't see his face, but I'm not going to worry about that now.

Oddly enough, despite all the ruckus he caused, Morgif's face doesn't frighten me at all. It's like when I watched all three volumes of the *Splatter Movie* in one night—around dawn, everything was just really funny. This is commonly known as the *Scream* 1-2-3 phenomenon.

"We've been asking around disguised as well-wishers, but there aren't any other patients in serious condition at this hospital. So I guess we'll have to try the sanatorium to the east or the old folks' home to the west?"

"Ugh. I know this is for Morgif, but I hate this life of going around waiting for somebody to die."

"This life? It's only been half a day, Your...oops, I mean, Young Master."

Conrad looks at my plate and pushes his own dessert over.

"This is nothing like your usual appetite. What's wrong? You didn't eat much at breakfast, either. Is hospital food not to your liking?"

"No, it's not that. It's not that, just..."

"If there's anything else you want, let me know and I'll go look for you. Tourism is the main industry of this island, so they can pretty much prepare anything you want."

"I want negroshinomayakishy."

They're edible? Wolfram's request is ignored.

"I want...let's see, boat-wrap sushi?"

"Boat-wrap sushi? What is that?"

"You put fresh sashimi and shellfish and stuff on a boat. Foreigners hate raw fish, but Japanese people can't live without sashimi. Like buri or hamachi or inada...oh, sorry, those are all the same fish. Mmm, Japanese amberjack."

Actually, that's not quite true.

It's probably stress from the unpleasantness of waiting for somebody to die. Since all four of my grandparents are in good health, death is still just a distant awareness for me.

Conrad peers at me, feels my brow, then touches his forehead to mine like a mother checking her child for a fever.

"Stop that, I'm not a kid!"

"You don't have a fever, but your color isn't good. You're probably still tired from last night. All right then, Josa will go west, I'll head east. You and Wolfram stay in the city. We've rented the second floor of a private house, so you'll be able to keep out of sight better than staying at an inn."

"Wait, aren't I the only one who can carry Melgib? You can't do anything if I'm not along, right?"

"There's a high possibility of it being a fool's errand. Still, if I borrow a horse I can get there in two hours. With you along it'd take twice that. I'll take a look around, and if things look promising, I'll come back and get you."

I nod reluctantly and hoist the uncomfortably heavy Morgif.

He's really light for a sword and fits into my hand like he was molded for it, but he's heavier than he looks when I'm carrying him around like a piece of luggage. And no matter how much cloth he's wrapped in, I'm the only one who can touch him without getting zapped by a bolt of lightning.

"Ooph, up we go."

"What's wrong, Yuuri? You sound like an old man."

I don't want to hear that from somebody who's eighty-two years old.

The city is overflowing with crowds of happy people having a good time. They've set their cares aside just for today and are all enjoying the festival to the fullest. The women are dressed in long one-piece dresses. Their flower patterns flutter in the breeze, beautiful as real blossoms.

The island is brimming with color; everything is so bright it hurts the eyes.

I gaze out at the scene from our rented private second floor. Morgif lies next to me, neither howling nor moaning.

"Hey Wolf."

"What?"

"What's a Lion of Ruttenberg?"

Wolfram thinks for a moment, staring into space, before his gaze finally returns to the diary, and he says, "Come to think of it, I've heard that's what people used to call Conrart. 'Cause his hair was a bit longer then. Ruttenberg is where he was born."

"Then who is Julia?"

"You should ask Mother that one. Because she was really close to Julia."

"Close?"

"Well...in Shinma Kingdom, there were three women with incredible magical powers. One was Golden Cäli, my mother. Another was Crimson Anissina—she and my brother...and Gwendal, have this thing—she's a short lady with red hair that looks like it's on fire."

"A thing with Gwendal?...a thing? What kind of a dangerous thing would that be...?"

"Don't ask me! The last was White Julia. Julia died—almost twenty years ago, now. Though she was one of the three great witches of Shinma Kingdom, she was born blind..."

The magic stone at my chest heats. Its original owner must have been...

"It's a pity that...Conrad...lost his lover..."

Wolfram suddenly starts shouting wildly. Talking about Conrad usually makes him mad, but I've said something so stupid this time that it's thrown off his denotation timing.

"Julia?! Julia, Conrart's lover?! I never heard about that!"

"What, you mean she wasn't Conrad's ex-girlfriend?! Huh? Must be my mistake. Okay then, just one more question, Wolf. What about the young general Grantz?"

His expression hardens, and his white hands clench into fists on the rough table. The open pages of the diary move slightly in the wind.

"Grantz is located on the northern tip of Shinma Kingdom. It's Adalbert's hometown."

Adalbert von Grantz.

Cold sweat slides down my spine.

He's the first Mazoku I encountered in this world, the man who tampered with my brain.
The man who tried to kill me.

"When his fiancée died he immediately abandoned his country. Because he wanted revenge on the Mazoku. He was engaged to..."

What's going on here, Conrad?

"White Julia...Lady Susannah Julia von Wincott."

What the heck is going on?!

After the conversation I eavesdropped on last night, I can't believe Julia was merely a friend. Which means that he was on the verge of an adulterous love triangle with a woman engaged to be married?! Dear me, Conrad, what a scandal! Now I sound like somebody's mother.

"Yuuri," Wolfram says coldly.

"Ah, yes?"

"Why are you making that face?"

"What face am I making?"

Probably the face of somebody's mother watching a daytime soap opera.

"Why are you asking about Adalbert and Julia with that expectant look on your face? It's making me angry. Aaaaall right then, let's keep reading this diary!"

"Wah, please just stop reading that thing out loud!"

"Though His Majesty carried himself with steadfast regality before the coronation, yet there was an air of anxiety about him."

"Stoooooop!"

Isn't this starting to sound more like a novel?! I reach for the diary, but he side-steps and escapes to the bed.

"...This ephemeral quality, so fragile that it might crumble away at a touch, can be found only in boys who have not yet crossed the boundary into young men."

"Just hurry up and burn that thing already!"

I pounce, trying to grab it from Wolfram, and land on top of him. This is the exact moment when—

"Listen to this, Young Master...oops."

"..."

"Am I interrupting your fun, by any chance?"

Josak closes the door again.

"No, no, wait! We weren't having fun, we were not having any fun of any kind, you're taking it the wrong way! This is a massive, majorly massive misunder—ow!"

I've bitten my tongue.

"My my, Young Masters, it's the middle of the day, so if you're going to have a dalliance, you should at least lock the door. You really shouldn't tempt your elders like this," Josak teases in the voice he uses when disguised as a woman, and enters the room. He waves the yellow piece of paper in his right hand before slapping it down on the table.

"Weren't you going to the old folks' home?"

"I was about to head over when I remembered to use my head. So I went over to the government office to take a look at the list of people registered at the institution. I mean, 'cause if I went and there was nobody there, then it'd be a total waste of time, wouldn't it? And I was right—all the old folks have gone home for the festival. I'm so glad I found that out before riding over...anyway, I got handed this flyer."

On the yellow paper is a line in large red letters, followed by three small lines, followed by two, three more lines in fine print. At the center is a rough drawing of a couple of young men standing shoulder to shoulder, pointing at the sun.

"I told you, I can't read this."

"'Urgent job recruitment! Be witness to the last moments of a life. Come cheer on a young man your own age facing his death! Seeking attractive young men in their teens. Owned swords welcome, extraordinary wages, interview at any time'...I can't read the fine print either."



Annoyed, Wolfram snatches away the paper.

"Human cursive is so strange. It has absolutely no beauty or elegance. It's too different from the artistry of our writing."

"But what kind of a job is that, 'be witness to the last moments of a life?' Shouldn't that be a doctor or a nurse?...or an undertaker, maybe?"

Actually, that's after death. But I guess I should add religious folk too. Since they listen to confessions and say prayers. So why would swords be welcome? Monks with swords are priest soldiers, and they were all subjugated by Nobunaga.

"I don't get this island's writing."

"What's important is that you and that sword can be at somebody's last moments, right?" Josak claps his hands briskly. "So let's give it a try. Off to the interview!"

"What? But I don't think I meet the appearance requirement."

The two Mazoku reply in concert: "You'll be totally fine!"

I'm sorry to say this, but your aesthetic sense is approaching a mania.

"That's a rather seedy-looking sword you have there," the interviewer, who looks exactly like Colonel Sanders, mutters, scowling at Morgif. "But the thing is, we suddenly got this teenage kid sent to us yesterday, and it's really put us in a bind. Because if you don't match a young fellow with a young fellow, it won't satisfy the spectators."

Spectators? Oh, he must mean the clients.

Six people including me came to the interview, and the rest of them are all attractive, good-looking guys. None of them quite have the particular beauty of the Mazoku, but on Earth they'd be comparable to a young Brad Pitt or Jude Law or Ewan McGregor or Ethan Hawke. And I didn't mean Pa League baseball mascot characters for those last two.

Then you have a baseball kid from the third district tossed into their midst. I might be able to offer some competition in the hundred-meter dash or the long throw or side-to-side jump, but when it comes to looks, I'm totally out of the running. Well, I should be totally out of the running. But—

"But when it comes to looks, you are certainly the cutest."

"Wha...huh?! Oh, sorry...um...yeah, I've got low self-esteem."

Hey wait, Van der Veer Island Festival Executive Committee Chair Representative! You mean it's not just the Mazoku's sense of aesthetics that's off, but this entire world's aesthetics?!

"What did you say your occupation was?"

"I'm self-employed."

"What kind of self-employment?"

Uh-oh, I haven't thought that far.

"A-adventurer!" is what I blurt out.

"Your name?"

"...MacGuver..."

Adventurer equals MacGuver, special forces equals the A-Team. That's all my brain can come up with.

"Mm, then you'll take it?"

"Me?!"

"Mm, yes, it's an honorary position, so put your back into it!"

So the line of attractive young men is kicked out, and the baseball kid is in.

Which means Morgif will get to absorb a human life. Though for that I have to be witness to a young man my own age breathing his last. The guilt is totally depressing. The young man must be terminally ill—I've got to sincerely do everything I can to be a good companion so that he can go without regrets.

I silently harden my resolve and head towards the waiting room to report the news to Wolfram and Josak.

"Where are you going? Your escort is already here for you, so you should hurry and change in the carriage."

"What's the big hurry?"

"It would be impolite to keep our spectators waiting."

My surprise allows the Chairman Representative to shove me into the carriage. He hands me a white shirt, then calmly, cheerfully squeezes himself into the remaining space.

"We suddenly got ten additional people, so this year's festival is guaranteed to be a huge success. We have five more than average this year, and with twelve participants the spectators are sure to go home totally satisfied."

"Right..."

I have no idea what he's talking about. Stop stroking my thigh like that, it's disgusting. I think I'm being sexually harassed. I pretend not to notice and wrap my hand around Morgif's hilt.

The old man lets out a scream and leaps out.

"Sorry, I generate a lot of static electricity."

I'm delivered to a place near the harbor enclosed by an ivy-covered brick wall. It looks like a stadium at first glance, like the holy land of high school students' dreams.

What am I doing at a place like this when I've got no chance of getting to Koushien? Compete in a talk battle?

With a young man on the verge of death?

An official accompanies me down a long corridor. Along the way there are a few places where the noise from outside is audible. It sounds like a subway platform.

The room he shows me to is already occupied.

The wide room is a dirty yellow, lined with benches. Ten or so men are seated away from each other. There's also one leaning against a wall gazing up at the ceiling and another staring into midair muttering an incantation. The one with a cruel smile looks like he's looking forward to something. They're all wearing the same white shirt as me, their weapons at their side.

A lone woman is standing quietly in the corner against the wall.

Oppressed by the men's bloodthirsty aura, my feet automatically take me in that direction. The slim woman, who looks to be in her late twenties, has dark blonde, shoulder-length hair. Her lips are set in a slight grimace, and she's hugging herself with both arms.

There aren't many people chosen for the privilege of honorary positions with attitudes like these.

Suddenly conscious of my throat going dry, I look around the room. I'm guessing they won't be serving tea in here. I dig around in my pants pockets for change, but all I have are a

couple of notes.

"Miss...um, ma'am? Would you happen to have any change...?"

Her head jerks up as if she'd been shot, and she looks from my face to the money. Her narrowed gold-hazel eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion and worry.

"If you're carrying around that much money, why are you in a place like this? A kid like you..."

She quickly presses a hand against her mouth, but none of the others have heard.

"You look about my youngest brother's age—he's fourteen this year. Look, if you don't need the money, you shouldn't accept a job like this. If they told you that it's a prestigious position, don't believe them—they're lying to you. It may look heroic and dashing when you're a spectator, but it's another story altogether when you're the one standing out there. You're not the hand of justice or a messenger of God—you're just a filthy killer!"

Killer?!

She seizes my shoulder and shakes me, continuing the one-sided conversation.

"Here's some friendly advice: just get out of here and go straight home. If you don't have a home, then go back to your parents! If my son wasn't sick, I would never stain my hands with something so awful. If you're not desperately in need of money, don't even think about doing something like this so young."

"Wait, hold on, wait a minute! 'Something like this?' What does that mean? I mean, someone read the flyer for me, and it said that they're looking for somebody to be 'a witness to the last moments of a life, to cheer on a young man facing his death!' ...Wait, killer? What does that mean? And spectators think it's dashing?"

"You didn't read it yourself? There are so many kids like you, and they're all misled! This is not a job where you cheer someone on, this is an execution. This is the last spectacle of the festival, a horrible and cruel exhibition, a place where people kill each other for show!"

There's a grand finale on the last day of the festival at the arena near the harbor—you'll definitely regret it if you miss it, the proprietress at the inn insisted.

She meant here? This is what I signed up for?!

"What are you talking about?! Execution? Kill each other? What does that mean?!"

"Somebody always freaks out, every single year," one of the others, a middle-aged man with a cruel smile on his unshaven face, mocks upon hearing my agitated questions. He approaches with a huge axe at his side. My hand on Morgif tightens. His faint smile widens.

"You don't have to be jumpy. Nobody's gonna cause a scene here. After all, we're all comrades in here, eh? I know all about bashing somebody's face in, but it don't look like you've got any idea. There's always a kid like you every year—this is my fourth time, so it ain't nothing new to me."

"Nothing new...okay, then why don't you tell me about what you did the other three times?"

I bluff, partly out of despair. The man straightens, throwing out his chest. My only ally here is my partner Morgif, and I'm very much conscious of his presence at my right. I can rely on him.

His low moan travels down my arm.

"Okay, I'll tell you. Once you walk out of this room, you'll enter the arena. They're gonna drag a criminal out from the opposite side, and you're gonna fight him. You'll take your sword or spear or knife or whatever weapon you like and chop 'em to pieces. No quarter given. 'Cause you'll be facing a criminal who's already been sentenced to death. Play with 'em as much as you can, 'cause the audience likes that. And if you please the audience, they'll take you back next year. I got this job last year too. Nobody sympathizes with criminals. You can kill 'em, and nobody'll blame you. This is an honorary position, anyhow."

The woman whispers to me, "You have to get out of here before you become like him. He's developed a taste for killing people. He's like a drunk who's always thirsty until he's killed."

You've gotta be kidding me, a taste for killing? Taste or special skill or most attractive feature, it's all bad. I dash up to the door I came through, grab the knob and pull.

"Dammit, it's locked."

"That's a pretty seedy-looking weapon you've got there, you sure you sharpened it?"

The man reaches out for Morgif at my side.

"Don...!"

He falls on his behind with a shrill scream and frantically rubs his left hand against the floor, searching for a cool spot.

"What the hell?! What the hell is that thing?! It's not just an ordinary sword! Hey kid, where the hell did you get that thing..."

The sound of creaking iron echoes from the entrance and opposite wall, followed by cheers and light flowing in from the corridor.

"Make your preparations, the two of you."

Three perfectly armed soldiers beckon to me and the woman.

I'm the top batter and the lady is second.

I consider shaking free from the soldiers and dashing away at top speed, but there's nowhere to run to but the middle of the arena. It won't change anything.

As we're driven down the dim passage, the woman tells me, "Listen, there's no chance for escape now, but you mustn't fall into despair. A kid like you mustn't become a killer. Just bide your time for now. I've heard that they'll be pardoned from their death sentences if they win against us, so they'll attack you with everything they have, but just run and dodge and take as much time as you can."

"If they win against us they'll be pardoned from their death sentences—does that mean

that some of us have lost, then?!"

"Very rarely. I've seen this festival lots of times since I was a child, but very rarely does a criminal survive."

So very rarely, the honorary position holder loses.

"Take your time, that's the important thing. They'll have to do something if the audience gets impatient. You'll probably be able to finish it without having to kill your opponent yourself."

"But..."

The roof suddenly falls away, and I'm engulfed by cheers. So many torches light the round arena that it's brighter than noon. It's almost like the start of a nighter.

But this is not a stadium. There are no benches, no bases, no lawn, only rough stone paving and the ocean breeze. What's going to take place here is not a game, but people killing people.

"In Japanese, there's only a single character's difference between 'coliseum' and 'people killing each other.'"

The entire audience is on their feet and singing with their hands over their hearts to a sonorous melody played by wind instruments. There are two flags on a pole—one for Cimarron, the other for Van der Veer Island.

In the exaltation around me, I'm the only one frozen in place, dazed.

Faced with this utterly inconceivable situation, my body is completely paralyzed.

Even since being summoned to this world, I've experienced various dangers up close and personal that no ordinary modern Japanese high school student would probably ever face. I've been attacked, fought a duel, almost assassinated and then kidnapped. But I was never alone, and someone always came to save me.

That's right—Conrad!

I look around, but he's nowhere to be seen. He's still on his trip, the one that takes two hours one way by horse.

But this is a pinch on a never-before-seen scale—a Leonardo da Pinch(i), even.

The soldiers shut the iron-latticed door and lock it to prevent us from going back in.

"You sure are in luck. The criminals we got yesterday are pirates, but the big shots were pretty much all extradited. The rest are all underlings and small fry. Practically no swordsmanship at all—you'll see."

"Pirates?! You mean the ones who attacked a luxury liner a few days ago?!"

"That's right. What's shocking is that there were Mazoku posing as passengers on that ship."

What do you mean, posing? I was a full-fledged passenger with a paid ticket and everything.

"Anyhow, around the time the ship came into harbor, they transformed into balloon puppets. They must've wanted to come to the festival, but who knows if they're alive or dead..."

If *that* battle takes place, it'd be a me versus me (the water rescue practice doll, Mr. Livesaver me, at least) dream team. Ending with a complete victory for me. Also instant death.

Some instrument that sounds like a trumpet plays a fanfare. Audience noise and anticipation has reached the G1 level.

The condemned criminal is dragged to the opposite gate, and both of us prepare for our entrance.

He's too far away for me to see clearly, but he looks like a boy of twelve or thirteen.

"He's still a kid!"

"He may be a kid, but he's also complete scum. He drugged all the guards on the liner and the escort ship so the pirates could get on without any trouble."

"I can't kill a kid! I mean, I'm not going to kill an adult or elderly person either!"

Actually, I can't even kill a sheep or pig. Or throw rocks at puppies.

"Don't forget what I've told you. Take as much time as you can, make the audience impatient."

"All-all right. Then he won't have to be killed, right? Okay then, I'll give it my best shot since I'm at the top of the lineup, so follow up with a bunt, okay?"

Total confusion.

A soldier grabs my arm and drags me out to the arena.

I'm alone. I have to get through this by myself, somehow. But how?!

What will do you, Shibuya Yuuri?

There's a low vibration at the tips of my fingers. My partner is moaning, calling me.

"...Morgif."

That's right.

He's Morgif, mightiest of demon swords.

Loyal servant of the Maou.

If I'm really the Maou, the genuine Maou, you won't leave me all alone, right?

"So, Partner, you trembling with excitement there?"

Don't call me partner (self-retort).

My opponent is holding a large two-handed sword. It glistens with good maintenance.

A sea breeze crosses the faraway waves into the coliseum. I untie the yellow cloth around Morgif and let it flutter away on the wind.

Revealing the demon sword.

"Everybody must be talking about what an awesome sword you are."

"What is with that pathetic engraving of a face?"

"Can something that dull cut someone apart?"

"It's disgusting!"

Disgusting? He's not disgusting! Morgif is unexpectedly unpopular.

Before I can reach the center of the arena my opponent lets out a strange cry and charges forward. He swings his silver sword down at me.

"...Woah!"

"Woo."

I barely catch it in time, and my arms endure the impact. Morgif lets out a low hungry-sounding moan as metal clashes against metal.

"The umpire hasn't made the call yet! You'll get ejected if you throw a duster!"

I can hear my opponent's agitated breathing right next to me. Only when we jump apart and put some distance between us can we finally see each other's face. It really is a kid—he must be about three years younger than me. His face has a quite a scattering of freckles, like one of those kids they use for peanut...

"Rick?!"

It can't be.

The boy has recognized me too, and the point of his sword abruptly drops to the ground.

"Why are you doing something like this...hasn't there been some mistake? You're a proper sailor—apprentices shouldn't be treated like criminals!"

"Why are *you* doing this...?"

"Never mind about me! Seriously, this must be one big misunderstanding, I'll go see a government official for you! Heeeeey, this boy isn't a pirate! I'll vouch for his identity..."

The audience yells. Morgif is struck soundly, and I lose my balance and pitch forward.

"...ah!"

There's a thin, shallow burning sensation across my shoulder.

"Rick...you..."

The boy swung at me from behind. His freckles have all but disappeared next to his bloodshot eyes, twisted lips and the red splotches on his cheeks.

"You're as soft-hearted as ever, mister."

Now I know why they had me put on a white shirt: red looks good on it.

"Are you really going to kill me?"

"I'll be a free man if I kill you."

"They're lying to you. Come on, Rick, they're lying to you! They hit you and threatened you and did horrible things to you to get you to confess to being a pirate, didn't they? Look, that kind of a confession is invalid. You can get a lawyer to help you! I'll do whatever I can to help, too."

Rick lifts his chin slightly and croaks a long laugh. It's full of the sort of helpless scorn of someone just barely holding back madness.

"Who's lying to me?! It was my job to pretend to be an apprentice and put the guards to sleep. It was also my duty to drop the ladder so my comrades could board more easily. Oh yeah, I was the one who reported that the deluxe suite passengers should still be in their rooms, too. You know, I was really quaking in my boots when you caught me right before I was going to put the plan in motion. But you're such a dunce that you said I was doing a good job patrolling!"

Self-loathing fills me, along with a shock that feels like I've been struck on the back of the head. If there were a hole here I'd crawl into it. I trusted the one I shouldn't have, and disdained the trustworthy sailor.

"But why...but you want to be a sailor, don't you?! You want to be the captain of a big ship, right?!"

"That's right, mister. I would've been the captain of a big ship. If you people hadn't interfered."

"Captain...of a pirate ship?"

"What other path is there? I've been with pirates as far back as I can remember. A kid like me, what other path is there for me?!"

He glares steadily at me, the pupils of his hazel eyes contracted to pinpoints as if they've been possessed by the devil.

I'm just a kid and an ordinary high school student, and I know nothing about swordsmanship. If we're talking about which of us has survived more carnage, it'd have to be Rick, who was born a pirate. My experience with this world is too shallow. I'm not used to these serious fights to the death.

"Haaaa!" Morgif groans thinly, the sound traveling from the guard to the tip.

"Okay, so you're probably the veteran of a hundred battles, but I've never swung anything except a bat! And incidentally, just pinch-hitting at that, not even as one of the starters!"

"You certainly have composure to spare! Who are you talking to?"

"The sword!"

Huh, now I feel like a super master ventriloquist.

"Baboo."

"You're not baby Ikura from *Sazae-san*, geez!"

Since he hasn't absorbed a human life, I know that he can't demonstrate his abilities yet. But if I don't do anything but defend, my opponent's going to seize the initiative. I have to get Morgif to fight somehow, too.

Would anything happen if I started calling out the names of special moves?

"Melgib—I mean, Morgif—Puncho!"

Puncho is Itou.

"Wait, no, I mean, Morgif Punch!"

Punch is Satou. Okay, calm down. Punch and kick can't be a sword's special moves. It'd have to be something like 'Diagonal Slash!' or 'Cleave!' or 'True White-Feather Blade Catch.'

Those are all Japanese katana specials...

I will do what I can.

"Huh?"

Words suddenly flash across my mind. Not a voice, but written words.

Steel clashes against steel like a high-pitched percussion instrument. The fingers of my right hand at the top of the hilt have gone numb. My index finger grazes the back of the guard.

I will do all that I can.

"I'll be free if I kill you! I'll do it, even if you're a scary Mazoku! They'll honor me if I get a Mazoku! Maybe it'll even mean that someone like me can live as something other than scum!"

"I'll do just what I can."

Repel the falling silver arc from below, turn aside the tip and stagger away. Deflect the next swing slantwise. I pull Morgif back with all my might. Take back.

The tip of Rick's blade strikes the ground, scattering blue sparks. With the grip end just skimming my navel, I aim for his forward-slouching waist and swing.

My weight shifts from the big toe of my pivot foot to my left arm. The excessive force trusts out my knees. It was supposed to be a Nakamura Nori-style full swing, but however I look at it, it wouldn't have hit anything but a breaking ball, and only manage a foul tip at that.

"...Guh!"

Rick lurches and staggers, crouching and pressing a hand against his stomach. Bloody saliva foams from his mouth.

I lower Morgif's tip and finally exhale.

"I'm sorry. I'm not a sword master or anything, so I don't know how to go easy on someone."

"...K..."

"You probably feel kinda sick right now, but it's better than being in two halves, right? He's as dull as he looks. He can't cut anything if I don't sharpen him."

Rick grasps my ankle. He looks up at me with burning eyes, still crouched. Terrible burning eyes full of hatred. He must detest me for being so cruel to him.

"...Kill...me..."

"I'm not going to kill you. Somebody told me earlier that I should take as much time as I can, and the audience will be satisfied without anybody being killed. Something'll happen if the audience gets impatient."

"Woo," Morgif warns. Since you're a demon sword, you must want to absorb his life as soon as possible, but the problem isn't that simple.

"I'm not going to kill you—you should get a proper trial. You've known nothing but the pirates' life since you were a baby and haven't received any kind of proper education, so of course you can't distinguish between good and evil: those facts need to be taken into consideration. It's not too late for you to correct yourself. You'll definitely be a sailor one day."

The audience begins to howl at our inactivity. They're standing, shouting 'guilty!' Men and women both are spitting curses down on us in language that makes me want to cover my ears, demanding a decisive win or loss.

"What's wrong with you people? You actually enjoy something like this...?!"

A hand smudged with sweat and sand crawls up my knee.

He clutches my shoulder, trying desperately to stand, and wipes the blood from the corners of his mouth.

"You got hit with a full swing, don't try to overdo it."

A flash of wind crosses the edges of my vision.

The boy convulses wildly and collapses. I can't hold him up with one arm, and fall to the moist stone on my behind.

"Rick?"



He's lying between my feet, and there's a crimson stain welling up, spreading across his back. A heavy dark gray iron arrow is protruding from his white shirt.

"...Rick...why?"

The audience roars approvingly. There are even people embracing and dancing. Applause and cheers swell across the arena—even breathing is becoming painful.

"Why?! Why are you giving a standing ovation?! The fight was over! There was no need for this! Who did this? Who shot this arrow?! Get down here! Stand and face me!"

If you take enough time and make the audience impatient, an archer will kill your opponent for you. Is that the way it is? Criminals live very rarely.

So that's how it is.

"Dammit, get down here! Show your face, you dirty bastard! This is the work of a coward! Who was it, who thought this up?! Get out here! I'll, I'll kill...him...I'll kill..."

No!

In the pure blank whiteness of my head, my Japanese DNA holds back the Maou's soul.

This is not why I'm here in this world.

This is not why I was chosen. Is it?

"Wooooooo...wooo.....wooo...."

"Morgif?"

The demon sword moans intermittently. The obsidian stone in his forehead, set in the same spot as the Buddha's, flashes brightly.

There's some kind of uproar in the front row of the guest seats, out of which a faint, blurry blue lump about the size of a ping-pong ball rises and falls in a perfect parabola straight into Morgif's mouth as if sucked in.

"Wait a minute, Morgif, what the heck was that?! You can't just eat whatever people throw away. Spit it out—spit it out right now!"

The exact reaction of a pet owner upset at his dog for scavenging for food.

"Oh no, Grandfather's heart has stopped!"

"I told you so, he's already a hundred and twenty, and he's viewing an execution from the front row."

"He wanted to see the young woman who's up second, it's such a pity that he died at the first round."

"But look at the satisfaction on his face."

"Wow, it's true. He spent his entire life living and dying for women, but maybe in his last moments he awakened to cute young men?"

What kind of grandkids say stuff like that about their grandfather...?

The demon sword starts quivering in my hand. I set Rick down gently and hurriedly shift to a two-handed grip. The light from the stone on his forehead is growing stronger—it's shooting a beam of light up into the sky.

"Wait a minute. Was that...did you just inhale that old man's life? I wasn't trying to invoke you in a place like..."

Unfortunately I'm missing some vital information. What happens when I invoke the demon sword? The VTR neglected to provide an explanatory diagram. Um, let's see, there was something about a cow flying into midair...and a cow flying into midair...it's no use, the impact of that image was so strong that I can't recall the other parts.

In the meantime Morgif is still quivering, and the audience has stopped its merry-making.

They're too busy now to even think about the second execution. What is happening with that sword? The babble of voices sweeps around the arena.

And Morgif barfs.

"Waugh, what the, what the heck is that coming out of your mouth?"

However you look at it, it's a yellow vomit-like substance flowing out of the mouth that bit me. I can't really call it liquid; even though it's sort of amorphous, it doesn't feel wet.

The yellow vomit finally thickens into a wide band and begins pulling me along with enormous power. If I let go Morgif will probably make like one of those buckets used in a centrifugal force experiment, and I don't know where he'll end up. I can't lose the ultimate weapon after all the trouble I went through to find him.

"Owey owey."

"Gah, is this because your stomach's been empty for fifteen years—?"

And now he's getting stomach cramps because he stuffed himself?!

The sword fits the owner. Birds of a feather flock together?

One of the spectators finally realizes and starts yelling.

It's a demon sword.

"It's a demon sword! It'll burn this place to ashes, it's going to kill us all!"

Chapter 9

After some serious self-reflection, Lord von Kleist has come to the conclusion that some apology is required for his eccentric behavior—which is why he is heading for Lord von Voltaire's private chambers with a basket of strawberries in hand.

Though they have known each other for a very long time, this visit to Gwendal's living quarters is his first. Günter sighs dramatically. What if he barges in on Gwendal being attended on by a bevy of beautiful women?

"...For Gwendal, at least, that's not very..."

Head bowed, Günter ascends the stairs with an air of exquisitely becoming tragedy. Rude though it might be to say, he looks poised to become the subject of a master painter's masterpiece.

He gracefully announces his visit with the door knocker and pushes open the heavy door.

"Gwendal, a word if you please...I came to apolog...ize...urg..."

His speech comes to a grinding halt at the unexpected tableau in front of him.

Gwendal is not being attended on by any beautiful women—or beautiful men, for that

matter; nor is he amusing himself with any kinky hobbies.

The chamber belonging to the master of the castle is appropriately furnished and decorated with burnished, glistening suits of ornamental armor. A framed portrait of the previous lord with his wife and daughters is prominently displayed. Perhaps the only thing missing is an antlered deer head. But in a corner of the room is a pile of strange objects.

Lord von Voltaire is in the chair by the window, long legs crossed.

"Did I give you permission to enter?"

"Aaah, um, well...I'm really...er, I'm really sorry. Um, Gwendal, what..."

A mountain of objects made of knitted wool is piled in the corner of the room opposite the fireplace.

At the bottom are things made from folded cloth, but the nearer the top of the pile the more complex the objects. There are so many knitted stuffed animals that they look ready to start an avalanche at any moment.

"I didn't know...you knitted as a hobby..."

"It's not a hobby."

Okay then, what's with the little rabbits and kittens and puppies?! And what about the one you're working on right now?!

"It's a stress-reducer."

"Stress..."

"When I'm knitting, my mind is freed from obstructive thoughts."

So when his mind is freed he makes cute little animals? Gwendal's expression doesn't change in the slightest as his fingers move on his lap.

Ah, so that's it, the tutor realizes. That's why his fingers twitch like that when he's irritated. He's unconsciously trying to preserve his presence of mind by doing fantasy-knitting.

Now he knows something he shouldn't. If it were possible he'd unknow it.

"But there have been so many unpleasant incidents lately that I've been finishing them one after another. I've been giving them away to my subordinates and servants, but honestly, foster parents are scarce."

"S-scarce?"

"Want this one?"

Günter hurriedly catches the small, dark knitted animal Gwendal tosses to him.

"Wh-what a cute little black pig."

Gwendal lifts an eyebrow. His matchlessly cool eyes glint a terrifying sapphire.

"...That is a bear."

The yellow band mows down the coliseum.

Chaos reigns within, filled with the screams and bellows of people trying to escape.

I'm doing everything I can think of to subdue Morgif or soothe him or cajole him, but after absorbing his first human life in fifteen years, the demon sword shows no sign of stopping.

Judging by the spots covered in whatever it is he's spewing out, it's not particularly harmful to the human body. My own body is ample evidence of that. But the Humans are panicking and climbing over each other to be the first to get away from me.

"Stop it, Morgif, stop!"

"Yuuri!"

Tears unexpectedly spring to my eyes at the sound of that familiar voice.

He vaults the fence and jumps down from the audience seats, then rushes over with an expression I've seldomly seen on his face.

"Conrad!"

"Your Majesty, how did you end up in a place like this?"

"Don't get too close—watch out! The vomit is okay to touch, though."

"Lower the sword. Point the tip down toward the ground."

I'm not strong enough to control it. Conrad unhesitatingly comes up behind me and covers my hands with his on the hilt of the sword.

"Don't! Your hands—!"

"...It's all right. Now, slowly. Down, yes."

Call my name.

"What?! What did you say?!"

"It wasn't me."

Words flash in the back of my mind like the afterimage of fireworks—written, not spoken.

Call my name, and I will do all that I can. My name is...

"Willem Dussollier Eli de Morgif!"

"Yuuri?!"

"If you're gonna barf, do it into an etiquette bag!!"

Gulpreen.

The sound Morgif makes is not a *gulp* or *karumph* or *gulop*, but a razor-sharp *gulpreen* as he frantically holds down his stomach cramps. His mouth, usually wide open, is sealed into a slit, and there's even a tiny wrinkle on his brow.

"What sort of sorcery did you use?"

"You know that I'm a faux-magician, right? I didn't use any magic. It wasn't sorcery at all; I was only reading out loud the words that were being transmitted directly into my brain via ESP.

"Read? Does that mean that you can now read?! Ah, I'm sorry, let's leave that for later. Wolf and Josa should be securing our path. We need to get out of here right now."

"But Rick..."

A fleeting glance at Conrad's palms is enough to show me their painful redness, but he ignores them and lifts the boy up in his arms. With a 'Your Majesty, please see to Morgif,' he leads the way out.

The woman who was kind to me is alone next to the gate I came through, running around looking after the crowd bewilderedly. She has suddenly been deprived of money to treat her son.

"Excuse me...ma'am."

She glares at me in surprise, and fear is intertwined with hatred and rage within her narrowed eyes. I dig into my pocket and hold the bills I find there out to her slim fingers.

"Here."

"You're Mazoku, aren't you?!"

She quickly backs away as if she's been touched by something dirty.

"I thought you were an ordinary child, but then you...you unleash that terrible sword! You Mazoku came to kill us Humans, didn't you?! You want to wipe us out! Don't touch me!"

"All right, I won't touch you. Here, I'll put this money here."

"You think I'd pick up something like that?! You want to lure me in with that money, wait for me to take it and cut me down with that sword! Damn you, what sort of a weapon is that anyway?! Well, we Humans will pray to God and ask for an even stronger weapon! We Humans will make an even stronger weapon..."

"I don't care about any of that!"

I thrust out my hand like bona fide prodigal son and take Conrad's wallet. The woman

involuntarily staggers forward half a step at the sight of the heavy leather wallet.

"Take this money and go get your son treated for his illness."

"If I pay the doctor with money from a Mazoku, my son will be cursed."

What the hell?! Why?! Money is money! It doesn't matter who uses it, it's this island's currency.

I place both the wallet and my notes on the ground. Not looking at the woman, Conrad smiles at me and says: "My father even had a child with a Mazoku woman."

"Was he cursed?"

He puts on an absolutely superior know-it-all look.

"Not at all. He lived until he was eighty-nine and spent his life doing exactly what he wanted."

We run all the way back to the waiting room. Morgif is heavy, and I'm still worried about the woman. If she really is a mother, then I have to believe that she would make the decision to pick up the money for her son.

Wolfram and Josak are waiting impatiently for us with uniforms stolen from the soldiers. They seemed to have been talking, and it didn't feel like idle chatter.

"Change into this—hurry. We can't use horses in this confusion. We'll be heading for the marina rather than the harbor; please act like soldiers until we get there."

It takes a bit of effort to get Morgif wrapped up, and Conrad, unable to sit still and wait, gives me a hand. When I look around for Rick, I find him in the arms of a blond man I don't know.

"Your Majesty, hurry."

"Ye-yeah."

It's not far to the marina, but people scrambling to get away from the arena choke the road. This is why we're in disguise. The power of the uniforms is extraordinary; though many disgruntled looks are flung at us, everyone still gets out of our way.

Even among the several extravagant cruisers anchored at the marina, one snags the eye with her beauty and elegance. Silver stars adorn her snowy-white body, and her unfurled sails are a deep aqua blue. A woman is waving from the deck.

Her golden curls fall to her waist, and her lascivious clothes border on the criminal...actually, they're more 'cloths' than 'clothes.' If she were an idol, she'd get negative reviews from her agency. Her beautiful long legs, with skin as fair as that of her third son, are generously exposed.

Aaah, geez, Lady Cäli, please spare me.

Her breasts sway with every wave of her hand.

After the 'oh, it's been so long!' greeting, which is way too intense for my peace of mind, we enter the cruiser. It's so enormous that I don't think anybody but a foreign millionaire or Kayama Yuuzou could afford it—and filled with so much gold and silver and gemstones that it makes me think 'can't you just use iron for that?!' Like the chamber pot.

"A gentleman and dear friend from Cimarron insisted that I make use of this boat. He even got down on his knees to make the request, so how could I be so cold as to refuse?"

The Sexy Queen is active in various locations all over the world. It looks like the pheromone advisory this year has to be issued in this very country of Cimarron.

Lady Cäcilie von Spitzweg, in addition to being Her Majesty the Prior Maou, is also the mother of Gwendal, Conrart, and Wolfram, the Mazoku brothers who are unlike as unlike can be. Though she has three children, she doesn't look a day past thirty, and is popularly called the Hunter of Love. Thanks to me she is now retired from active duty, and is out of the country on a trip of free love.

"I was coming to see the famous Van der Veer Fire Festival when I heard a rumor that Mazoku were captured here. I asked Chevalier to investigate and was able to get in contact with Wolf."

Chevalier is Lady Cäli's companion, the blond man who was carrying Rick. Surprisingly, I now recognize him—he's the attendant I met last month in the bath.

"Oh Your Majesty, you are as cute as ever. Are things coming along with my son?"

"No-no-nothing's coming along!"

"Oh my, that's too bad. And I was imagining *so much* more."

What?! WHAT have you been imagining?

"But does that mean I still have a chance? Oh, how I tremble at the thought. This 'Captive of Love' has extraterritorial status and is free to travel any ocean in the world, so don't worry about any boors barging in on us."

Then you should've let us take this boat for our journey. But why did you have to give it such an embarrassing name?

"More importantly, Mother, let us set sail as soon as we can. We have an injured person, and His Majesty is tired as well. Do you have a Healer on board?"

No matter how perfect her charms, her son seems proof against them. Looks like that's one universal principle.

"Talk to Chevalier about that. Someone has been injured? Oh my."

Lady Cäli covers her mouth with her hand sweetly at the sight of Rick lying on the verge of death. My head is spinning. To an unpopular high school student like me, she's a heavenly maiden.

"...Arrow man, hmm?"

He's not that duck with the arrow in his head!

"I have just the person. There's a handsome middle-aged Healer on board, but he's my beautician, so I don't know about wound-healing..."

"Handsome middle-aged Healer...? Mmmn..."

"Anyway, Your Majesty, were you able to get the demon sword? Won't you let me take a peek?"

How can I refuse? I unwrap Morgif from his swaddling cloths. Lady Cäli is simply overjoyed at the sight of him. Smiling widely, she asks, "Incredible! I've never seen any sword so ugly! Your Majesty, can I use it to decorate my room? Please?"

"Ask Günter that when we get back to the castle."

But if she did use him as decoration, she'd probably get nightmares every night.

Catching sight of Conrad leaving the cabin, I unthinkingly chase after him. Josak is alone on deck, gazing back at the island. Before I can reach the top of the stairs, Conrad seizes his friend's collar.

"What were you trying to do?!"

"What are you talking about?"

There's a thud as my Guard of the Inner Circle hits the wall.

"It's true that Wolfram doesn't know about the festival. He has no interest in Humans. But you! Cimarron is your country—you were raised here—you lived here until you were twenty! There's no way you can't read the language! And there is no way you haven't heard about that depraved pastime!"

Though he's shoved against the wall, Josak doesn't lose his Roger Rabbit smile.

"But everything went well, didn't it? If His Majesty hadn't lost his nerve at the crucial moment, Morgif would've absorbed the kid's life and been sated. Well, in the end I guess he satisfied himself with that old grandpa's life. Now the demon sword we bring back to the country will be ready for use at a moment's notice. None of our enemies would've been afraid of something we can't use."

"...Your way of doing things is wrong."

"Wrong? How is it wrong? Who knows what will happen if we leave the country to a child-king like that? He needs someone behind him, steering him in the right direction. Doesn't that make it easier for His Majesty too?"

I can't go out now. I grip the railing tightly. Ignorant of the fact that the subject of their conversation is eavesdropping on them, their quarrel grows ever more heated. Conrad never gets angry thoughtlessly.

"Making light of the king and manipulating affairs of state is tantamount to rebellion!"

"Making light? I'm not. Didn't we come to get the demon sword because His Majesty said he doesn't want to go to war? Having a strong weapon is certainly not a bad thing. Which means that we need the ultimate weapon so we're more powerful than anybody else. That way our neighbors won't attack us. See, there's a principle behind His Majesty's thinking, too. That's why I'm doing all I can to help him. Now when His Majesty goes home with Morgif, he'll have a place of honor among the Maous of Shinma Kingdom. Even the people support a strong king. So tell me, how were we wrong?! How are we making light of him?"

"There was no need to put him in so much danger! If anything had gone wrong, injury wouldn't have been the end of it!...to say nothing of making His Majesty kill someone...!"

Their words stab into my thoughts, making me so dizzy that I can't stay upright.

I've forgotten something. I'm wrong about something, too.

But the thought isn't concrete enough for me to grasp.

"In the end, I guess—" Josak says in a casual conversational tone, removing his friend's hand, "—the point is that the young lord's very important to you, isn't he? Publicly, you claim to be working toward peaceful coexistence with Humans, but in reality you just don't want the new king to be hurt—that's why you praise him and protect him and raise him up with all your might."

"You understand nothing."

"Nothing? If he's that important to you, why don't you put him in a box and hide him away somewhere deep in the castle? Lock him up in his room and don't let him come out."

"Josak!"

"You even gave him that precious stone of yours, huh?"

The magic stone heats at my chest.

When he was still called the Lion of Ruttenberg, who did this stone belong to? That person must have been someone so much smarter than me, someone who wouldn't be manipulated.

See, Conrad? My approval rating's at rock bottom.

"You might scorn Stoffel, but you're doing exactly what he did. Will you push His Majesty into making the same mistakes as Lady Căcilie, Her Majesty the Prior Maou?"

"No indeed, Your Excellency, my lord Conrart Weller. Lady Căli's mistake was refusing to reign herself and leaving everything to others. She was mistaken in her choice of advisors."

"...Are you saying that she should have chosen Lord von Voltaire?"

"No."

Josak abruptly shuts his mouth.

I slowly trace the pendant's narrow silver border, where the lives of its owners must be carved memory by memory. If only, like my grandfather's record collection, a needle could traverse its grooves and revived those memories.

"...Everything is too late now. We must not fail this time; we cannot let something like that happen again."

"No matter what schemes you think up, you will never turn His Majesty into your puppet."

"You're not listening, are you? We're not trying to make him into a puppet. We love him, we really do."

"Even so! If anything like this happens again, if you put Yuuri in danger again—"

There is a strangely long, heavy silence.

"...Be prepared to pay with your life."

Conrad's voice is low, harsh. I've never heard him like that before. He immediately turns on his heels. I hurriedly descend the stairs as his footsteps approach.

"I will tell Gwendal that in person! Your way of doing things will only harm His Majesty."

"Do as you like."

The voices become distant and hard to make out.

"Still, even...looks like that...the lordling...without...huh? ...'cause...got...a king's..."

"He is the only one who doesn't acknowledge that."

We decide to spend the night in the luxury cruiser so we can leave for Shinma Kingdom when all the other tourists set sail on the morrow, and drop anchor on the other side of the island. Of course there are more than enough rooms. And beds.

The north side of the island is so quiet and tranquil that you might almost think all the tumult earlier never happened. There's no sign of the festival here. You wouldn't even believe that it's the same island—there's no noise or light or crowds.

I insist on going down to the beach, and start jogging for the first time in a week.

I need to get my body back to its usual pace, or my mind won't work either. If I can get my feet moving and my blood circulating, it'll bring oxygen up to my brain. So the more I run, the more endorphins my brain will secrete, and maybe then I'll come up with a good idea I wouldn't normally think of.

Talk about naïve.

I jog barefoot along the beach illuminated only by the ship's lights.

My feet sink into the warm, wet sand, cushioning the impact with flip-flapping noises.

I can't go running by myself, of course. Conrad follows silently behind me. I'm jogging with a bodyguard, like the president of the United States. I guess it can't be helped when you're a king.

I'm sweating as soon as I start: proof that my physical baseline has dropped.

"In junior high, when I was in, the baseball club, we had to run every day, and I thought, it was totally natural."

"What about now?"

"My body's gotten, really lazy since, I stopped going to club. I started, playing baseball again, a little while ago, but I'm still, not back in shape yet."

"I see."

What irks the hell out of me is that he's not even out of breath. I wonder if sword masters jog every day, too?

"Aargh, I keep thinking, that maybe, I shouldn't have stopped, that I should, be in the baseball club now, too."

"You said that you hit the coach and was kicked out, right?"

"Yeah."

I bend with my hands on my knees, then sit down on a dry spot on the sand.

"Give me a push. I'm going to stretch."

"Stretch?"

"Yeah. Stretching on the beach at night. Ooph, how romantic."

Well, if I weren't with a guy.

"Hitting your coach—that's pretty drastic, too."

"Yeah, one, two, because he said something, really horrible. Three, something, he shouldn't have said."

Nostalgic memory. It doesn't make me angry anymore, though it does make my chest ache a bit.

It happened just before the start of summer—almost a year ago, now.

One of the pitchers who advanced to the best four in the Little League Nationals entered the junior high school in the next district. Our club, on the other hand, was full of newbies who didn't know one end of the bat from the other. They had to be taught everything from scratch, from running to batting and fielding. We got yelled at by our coach every day.

Our right fielder, a third year, was injured in a practice game one day, and a first year took his place. There was no way he could throw directly to home from the outfield without going to the cutoff, but he tried anyway. The ball couldn't reach either the catcher or a relay in time, and the runner scored.

"After the match, the coach singled him out and told him that if he can't even make a play like that, he should stop. ...No, wait, he told him to turn in his resignation note. 'You haven't got the qualifications to play baseball, Third Middle is strong enough as it is, we'll never win if we don't get some good players in'—stuff like that. 'I've got no time for a useless loser like you, go join some other club.' That's what he said."

Even though the other team was still on the grounds, he said it so loudly that everybody could hear him.

"And then you punched him?"

"Mn? Yeah. 'You're the one who's not qualified!' And then, bam!"

It was short-tempered even for me. So totally embarrassing.

"Of course, it would've been great if the coach were trying to encourage him to work harder. But I've been a substitute for a long time, and I could read between the lines. Even kids can tell the difference between 'get lost' and 'try harder.' You can push harder, I won't break."



"So you were kicked out for the sake of a younger teammate."

"That sounds pretty impressive—wonder if that's how they tell it?"

The ocean is black. So is the sky. The clouds are a dark gray. Only the moon and stars are

white—or blue or red or yellow. Glittering. Maybe the night sky is black so that the moon and stars can shine more brightly. And maybe the stars burn to make the night's blackness beautiful.

The break and retreat of the waves sound like scattered applause.

"...I wonder if it was true, though."

"Eh?"

"I've been thinking about it a bit lately. Did I really do it for my teammate?...to speak up for the team? Is that why I hit the coach? I've heard that the coach changed his attitude a bit after that, stopped talking trash about the team in front of students from other schools and saying insensitive things. And that's great and all, but...did I really do it for the team?"

The pushing against my back slackens.

"...Maybe I was just looking for an opportunity to stop because I was disgusted with myself for not having any talent? Maybe subconsciously I just wanted a way to leave the club looking cool instead of like a loser? ...I'm asking myself that now. Yuuri, was that really for the team? Stuff like that."

I'll probably never know the answer.

An arm encircles me from behind. My baseball buddy asks over my shoulder, so mildly that it sounds like he might be querying about the name of the leading hitter, "There's something you want to tell me, isn't there?"

"Yeah."

I can hear some sort of staccato beat against the sand, getting closer.

"...I'm thinking about leaving Morgif on this island."

What kind of explanation can I give him so that he'll understand this self-centered decision? I haven't got a clue. After all, we only came here to fetch the demon sword because I'm against war and want to avoid it. So the whole thing has been because of my whims. I can't say that it was an unqualified success, but still, if on the very night we achieve our goal I declare that I'm going to abandon the treasure... The opposing party would probably throw their shoes at me.

"I-I'm not sure how to explain it, though! I just—I just keep thinking about what that woman said to me. That the Humans will get a stronger weapon, that God will give them one. Would God really do that? But if that really happened, if they found a super-duper powerful weapon—"

"It's conceivable."

See? I knew it—he is angry.

"And then the other countries will want it too. Even the ones who've been impartial in the wars up until now will get uneasy and build up their militaries. So because we got Morgif, the rest of the world will begin to arm themselves...it'd be like nuclear deterrence or the three anti-nuclear principles."

Newspapers aren't just for reading about pro-baseball; I'll look them over in more detail in the future. But I'll bet only fifteen-year-olds in university cram schools can explain the problem so succinctly.

"The country I want isn't one that's stronger than any other country. There's a difference between a good country and a strong one."

If I return carrying Morgif triumphantly, my evaluation as Maou will go up. The citizens will give me a high approval rating, too, if they acknowledge me as a strong king. But Yuuri, would you really be doing what's best for everyone?

Or would it be for my own self-satisfaction?

If I asked my teacher, he would say, "Do it for the team, Shibuya Yuuri."

That abstract explanation sounds like prose out of some philosopher's pen, and I don't think anyone would understand it. Even so, Conrad murmurs in admiration next to my ear, "I see, like Gettysburg."

"What are you two doing over there?!"

Wolfram comes running over, panting. Even in the moonlight I can see his quivering finger pointed at us.

"I was wondering what was taking you so long, and now I find you—what are you two doing sitting so close on the beach?"

"What? Stretching."

There's an upward movement behind me, and the warmth leaves my back.

"Why are you so out of breath? Did you come just to keep an eye on His Majesty?"

"Oh right, no I didn't! We have a big problem, Yuuri. Your sword—"

"Morgif?"

"...broke."

Why? And more importantly, *how*?

Lady Cäli, dressed in a negligee so perfunctory that I have problems figuring out where to rest my eyes, winds her arms around mine.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I wasn't trying to. I never thought the sword might break."

My elbow pressed against her breast, unconfined by inelegant underwear, launches me into the stratosphere. A sweet flowery scent drifts around me, as if I've lost my way in a flower bed.

The demon sword is lying at the center of the cabin, a long dark lump. It was a shiny scabbard fish after feeding, but now it's a gigantic eel on the verge of death.

"Morgif."

"...Wooo..."

He's alive. We'll leave aside the question of whether or not 'alive' is the right description for a sword.

"He's so ugly and strange that I wanted to decorate my room with him for just this trip. When I picked him up to carry him over...this little one..."

Lady Cäli calls the sword 'little one' like an employee at a pet shop. Geez, mothers are impossible. There's probably nobody in the world who could ever criticize her.

"...this little one bit me."

"Di-di-did he give you a scare?"

"No, not at all. But I dropped him in my surprise, and he just wilted. It's probably..."

She picks up a small fermented soy bean with the pink nail of a slender white finger.

"...because this came off."

My fingernails are short and round. My hands are like fuzzy cloth yellow with age, and they're callused differently from everybody else's. But Morgif fits perfectly into their tight grip, snug and precise against each finger-joint. I hold him out like a bat before the swing. The thumb of my right hand lies on the guard, and my index finger caresses the back gently.

Even if I should lose the stone on my forehead...

"What?! Who said that just now?"

Just like when I yelled out Morgif's name at the arena, words flash directly into my mind: not spoken words, but an afterimage. Thin symbols blinking into and out of existence.

Even if I should lose the stone on my forehead and be reduced to a mere sword, I wish to remain by the Maou's side as your faithful servant.

"Why do you sound like a woman?!"

"Who are you talking to, Yuuri?"

"T-to Morgif."

Yes, Willem Dussollier Eli de Morgif, I will keep you by my side.

"Josak!"

Josak, looking on from a corner of the room, straightens at the unexpected address. His

wet orange hair clings to his forehead. He must've taken a long leisurely shower.

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"I will give this obsidian into your custody."

"Huh?!"

Everyone is flabbergasted. Conrad is the only one who immediately regains his composure, awaiting my next words with keen interest.

"I want you to take that stone Lady Cäli has and toss it away some place nobody would think to look."

"Toss it away..."

"Why, Yuuri?! Why would you do something that stupid? You're going to throw away a part of the demon sword we worked so hard to get?"

"I agree, Your Majesty, I think it could make a great earring. Very becoming for Your Majesty's hair and eyes."

"Mother, it is His Majesty's will."

The second son takes the stone from Lady Cäli's finger and places it in the palm of the Guard of the Inner Circle.

"...What if I take this and disappear and sell it to the king of some other country? Or take it back home and hand it to somebody else?"

"To Gwendal?"

He looks surprised. That's not some cunning deduction computed by my brain, but information gleaned from eavesdropping.

"You are free to do what you think is best for Shinma Kingdom. However..."

I fix him with an intent gaze out of eyes that are finally free of their contacts.

"Know that I have chosen you. Don't make that choice a mistake."

Josak gives me the beast's smile.

"I will serve, King Yuuri."

A clever beast's smile.

Chapter 10

"How discerning you are, Your Majesty, to have noticed such minute writing!" Günter exclaims in wonder, peering at Morgif in his sword stand. Today my tutor is wearing an off-white priestly garb and thin-rimmed glasses, and has his gray hair tied behind in a tight

knot. He really is beautiful.

The women would probably flock to line up outside the evil organization that employs him, not caring if they get remade into cyborgs if it's done by a scientist like him. But you've been misled, ladies. If you think about the fact that he's more than a hundred fifty years old, those glasses are probably not just for show.

"Yes, there certainly are sentences engraved on the back of the guard. 'Call my name, and I will cross the world to you. My name is Willem Dussollier Eli de Morgif. Even if the stone on my forehead should be lost and I am reduced to an ordinary sword, let me yet accompany you to the battlefield as your loyal servant, O Maou, and together we will slay all who oppose us.'"

"Th-that's how you're supposed to read it?"

Wow, I really pared it down to the kids' summary level.

"But I am deeply interested in the fact that even though Your Majesty cannot read, the words flashed through your mind at a touch. As I suspected, you are not just Mazoku, but one endowed with extraordinary power."

"Maybe I've got psychometry! That superpower where I know stuff just by touching something."

"Psychometry? Not that thing where you get asked a bunch of questions and someone tries to tell you your personality?"

Upon our return in the luxury cruiser, I presented Morgif, who has been downgraded into a completely ordinary sword, to Günter. He and Gwendal came to welcome us home, Günter waving so hard that it looked like his arm might fly off, and Gwendal with dark circles under his eyes looking like he's lost weight. I wonder what happened to them in the ten days I was gone?

Josak, carrying the obsidian—the sword's heart, I guess?—got off at Schildkraut. He didn't tell me or Conrad about which way he was headed.

Speaking of which, Lady Cäli took struck-with-arrow Rick instead of Morgif and set off on another journey. Once he's completed the handsome middle-aged beautician's healing course, he'll be a step closer to becoming a sailor. He's going to be an apprentice sailor on the luxury cruiser with Chevalier to straighten him out and teach him the ropes.

Sorry, Rick, I couldn't get you on board a giant shipping vessel. But I think it's at least better than a pirate ship?

Though the ultimate weapon we went through so much trouble to get isn't so ultimate anymore, Günter never uttered a word of blame. He only cried pearly tears, saying 'It is enough that Your Majesty returned safely—that is happiness enough.' I have this image of him as an overprotective mother, which has been completely confirmed.

He's just like a doting grandmother.

But he's flawless when it comes to his duties as the king's advisor.

After I told him about the trip and my thoughts, he took action immediately.

He had the news that the Mazoku were unable to obtain the demon sword 'leaked.' If we were to announce it publicly, people would be suspicious and think it's some kind of a scheme, but if we leak it like we don't want people to find out about it, they would readily believe it. The advisors are cleverer than the guy at the top. That's how statecraft is structured.

The master chef of Voltaire Castle stunned me with his display of talent at the welcome dinner, and I ended up with my head in my hands at the table, trying to figure out what to do.

"...So what am I supposed to do with this?"

"They told me, Your Majesty, that you wanted to eat something called boat-wrap sushi."

"Okay, sure, boat-wrap sushi, but..."

A white boat has been set out in front of me, filled with a mountain of fish large and small. And they're flapping their tails energetically. Yup, very energetically.

"But you said fresh fish."

"I didn't say *live* fish!"

And then there's Cavalcade.

Cavalcade, which appeared to be on the verge of declaring war on us, thus precipitating all of these events. Since we can no longer hope for the power of the demon sword to deter them, we must find another escape route.

I fretted over the problem, seriously pondering if I should venture over there, lower my head to them and propose that we improve our relationship.

But though we had no hope of any diplomatic overture, they were the ones who leapt to a solution first.

"Your Majesty...we have an inquiry from Cavalcade about a state visit and audience...in order to express their gratitude for traveling Mazoku defeating a band of pirates who were menacing their fleet, thereby saving the lives of their former crown prince, his wife, and his daughter...did you do something like that?"

"It sounds like the pirates had a really bad time of it, though. Well, as usual, I have no memory of it. Could you ask Conrad or Wolf?"

"It is apparently a gentleman named Hiscruyff..."

"Hiscruyff...?!"

Isn't that Mr. Shiny and his family?

"Hiscruyff, the eldest son of the current king of Cavalcade, was apparently engaged in an illicit love affair with a Hildyard merchant girl, whereupon he eloped from the royal family and left official service. But the current king's second son died of illness without an heir, so the Cavalcade royal family had to write in a law giving Hiscruyff's daughter the right to

inherit the throne, and have just recently called them home..."

"Holy cow! Then Beatrice is a real princess!"

It's Hiscruyff himself who's the hot-blooded romantic, not me.

Conrad pokes me in the side with a triumphant expression on his face.

"Which means that Your Majesty danced with a possible future queen in her debut evening party! What would your reply be if she's fallen in love with you at first sight and you get a marriage proposal from the Cavalcade royal family?"

"Conrart, how could you utter such ill-omened words? How could we allow a Human to steal our king's lips from us?"

So lips are the problem here?

"Oh, but we should be getting interrogated in Cimarron right now—our doll-selves, at least."

"It's getting to be a case of ingratitude on an international scale—will Cavalcade come to the rescue of...ah, our doll-selves...?"

It's funny just thinking about it, and even funnier if the air runs out of those Mr. Livesavers. Even Günter, who's usually way too serious, has to hold back a smile betrayed by the crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

In any case, it looks like we'll be able to avoid this war. I sink into my chair and breathe a sigh, staring up at the ceiling of Voltaire Castle.

"Chance is such a terrible thing."

"How so?"

"I mean, because we were on the same ship by chance, we were attacked by pirates by chance, I happened to save Beatrice by chance—and that's how we came to this peaceful resolution, right?"

"Not everything was by chance."

He reaches out a hand and straightens my collar.

"You would have done the same no matter who was on that ship. That was inevitable, and not by chance. If someone devised this entire plot, their chance of success would be extremely high."

"Plot?! Does someone capable of planning something like this actually exist?!"

"Probably not—at least, not in this world."

My impulse to press the question fades away at his good-natured smile. There are a ton of questions I want to ask him, but the only thing I say is: "Conrad, which do you think is stronger: tiger or lion?"

"...Lion, I would guess?"

"Yup, me too."

I think so too. There's nothing stronger than a lion.

I finally reach the room prepared for me, with the first non-swaying bed that I've slept in for a long time. It's way smaller than my bedroom at the king's castle, but the bed here is still super king-sized. No, it's demon king-sized. It can fit a hundred people no problem.

I shoo the servants out so that I can take my time.

I confirm that the room has its own bathroom, and turn on the hot water. It flows out of the mouth of a cow with five horns. Planning to stretch my legs a little while it fills, I head back to the bed to take off my clothes.

"...Aaah, so tired...wh-who's there?!"

Someone is lurking beneath the sheets.

I boldly fling off the covers, and—

"Wolf...what are you doing here?!"

"What do you mean, what am I doing?"

Wolfram, lying on his stomach and dressed like a madam after her bath, kicks his legs.

"I sneaked over for a night crawl."

"Night crawl?! A-as in, when a g-g-g-guy secretly crawls into a bed..."

"For a rendezvous?"

"Yeah, rendezvous...no no no no, that's not what I mean! The guy crawls into a woman's bed...!"

Now he's got me going at his pace.

Wolfram half-rises, scowling, a hand placed imperiously on his hip. He looks like pretty boy who's hit the mat after a knockdown, for those with the taste for it.

"If I had to wait for you, you'd never come to a decision."

"Um, incidentally, what sort of a decision are you looking for...?" My voice trails off as he sways his hips closer.

The Mazoku ex-prince's face brightens, and he pulls me down by the arm.

"Wah!"

"Are we any closer to a decision yet?"

"No!"

I'm terrified just thinking about what sort of decision this might be. I'm not going to lose my life or anything, but I do feel like there's something else I'm going to lose. I desperately extract myself, fly into the bathroom and lock the door.

"Yuuri!"

"Wait wait wait! I gotta take a bath first, okay?! You don't wanna do anything with a sweaty guy either, right?!"

Do...? I blanch at my own words.

My head and nose both prickle, and I stagger, suddenly dizzy.

"Yuuri! Hey, open the door!"

"No!"

Unable to keep upright any longer, I sit down on the rim of the tub.

"Blooploop."

I fall in backwards like a diver and submerge myself up to the top of my head. Even the bathtub is king-sized, so it takes a while to reach the bottom...yeah, as if!

"Woah, I waff foo fuuprifed, iff I waff doodally naged bag dare...koff."

I'm in a virtual reality whirlpool. Though it feels a lot more real than virtual. I curse my own stupidity as I'm sucked into the swirling flow of hot water.

I'm still wearing my underwear. Of all things, *those* underwear.

I'm crying on the now-familiar Star Tours journey, thinking:

This is way better. Rather than being stuck with a decision like that (or maybe having it made for me), going back to Japan is way better, even in this underwear.

It's getting a bit chilly with the air brushing against my wet body.

Light blue fills my cloudy vision.

Light blue, light blue, light blue—that was the color of the pirates' collar.

"...Sailor uniform...?!" The shadow crouched next to me mutters in disbelief, peering at my face. "Sailor uniform? *That's* what he says as soon as he wakes up...?!"

Actually, his clothes are water-blue too. Since we have reserved seats for this game, I was

the one who reminded him to come in the team's colors.

"I was thinking that you were taking a bit too long, so I came looking for you. That's when I found you asleep in the tub and going under. Didn't you hear me? I was shouting that we were going to miss the start at the top of my lungs."

I look around to find myself back in the public bath in my hometown with a smiling Hakone Hachiri no Hanjirou on the wall. The bathtub where I was pickling myself is empty. But I can't find a hole anywhere.

"And I was gonna be the hero of Holland, too."

"Hero of Holland? Which? Kluivert? The Wandering Dutchman?"

"Feh, you soccer nerd...I mean, forget soccer! Murata, what time is it? Has the match started?!"

"I don't think so, but...I'm thinking about skipping out this time."

"You can't skip out! This is Coach's day—Ito-sama is going to be starting! You've gotta go cheer him on!"

I leverage my aching body upward and is struck speechless by the sight of my lower body.

"...Oh dammit."

"Shibuya, I'm not going to tell the bathhouse staff this time around, but next time you have to take off your underwear before getting in, you know? It's a public bathhouse rule, even if they're thongs and not many people wear them."

Murata Ken looks away from my (black) thongs.

"Um, you know, there's a story behind this. It's a long story, but this is normal wear for my country."

"Your country? Story from where?"

"A story from my country..."

"What are you talking about, Shibuya? You're Japanese. Do you have another country?"

I think dimly: the match is starting at the stadium.

I remember a fight to the death with a boy in a coliseum resounding with cheers. I remember Morgif's hilt fitting perfectly into my hands. All the reasons converge like a folding fan.

Japanese DNA and the soul of the new Maou.

"...I've decided on eternal pacifism."

Anyone else would have taken a step back from me.

But Murata Ken only smiles vaguely and says, "What's with you all of a sudden? Making such manly comments...?"

Well, that's a given.

The Maou's gotta be manly, right?

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